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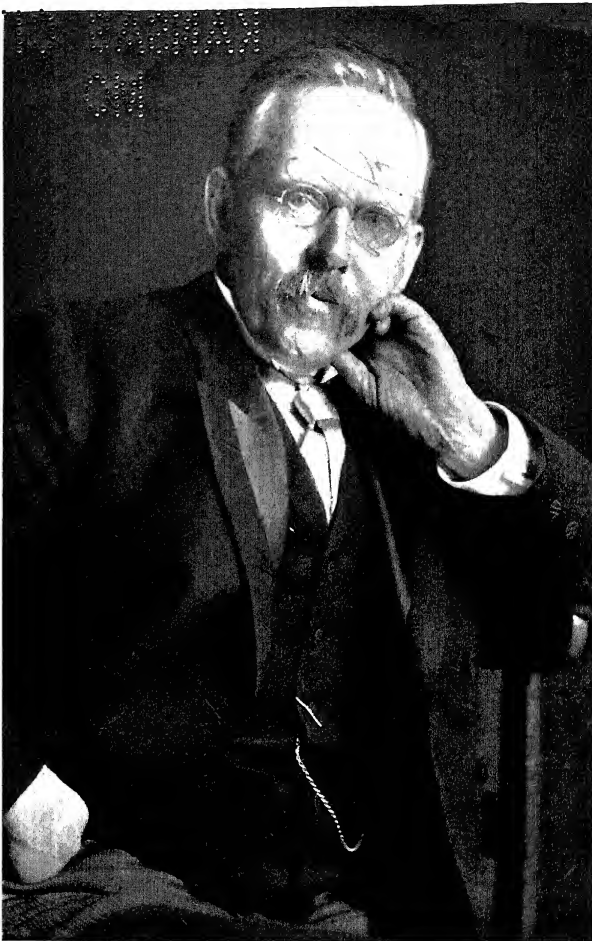
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JACOB A. RIIS

Police Reporter, Reformer, Useful Citizen

By LOUISE WARE

*Instructor in Sociology and Director of Social Work
Adelphi College*



Introduction by
ALLAN NEVINS

D. APPLETON-CENTURY COMPANY
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INTRODUCTION

THEODORE ROOSEVELT and Lincoln Steffens have paid due tribute in their autobiographies to the invaluable work which Jacob Riis did directly for the poor and oppressed of New York, indirectly for the poor and oppressed of many cities; due tribute also to his lovable personality and inspiring traits of character. In his own autobiography he has related some of the most appealing chapters of his laborious and chequered life. But it has remained for Miss Ware to write in full the history of his useful career, and to draw with completeness the lineaments of the man. She has told a story that will impress every one interested in the ceaseless struggle for the diminution of poverty, and has added a vivid portrait to the gallery of American humanitarians. The materials she has drawn from Riis's personal papers are a contribution both to the history of New York City, and to our knowledge of a rarely admirable man.

Jacob Riis came to his great task in New York through a preparation of no ordinary kind. From his earliest days he knew something of writing and typesetting, for his father was half a journalist. Even as a boy in Ribe, as Miss Ware relates, he gave up a bit of his Christmas money to help cleanse a tenement, built over a rat-infested sewer, which had shocked his sensitive heart. It was a forecast of his later career. Coming from clean and orderly Denmark to the chaotic, half-lawless, fiercely individualistic society of post-bellum America, with its stark contrasts of wealth and poverty, he would have been deeply touched by much

that he saw even had his lot been fortunate. But for some years he suffered all the hardships to which immigrants were then subject. He knew maltreatment by employers, abuse by the police, semi-starvation, exploitation, ceaseless anxiety. When finally he gained a footing, it was as a reporter; and the work he did for the *Tribune* and *Sun* for more than twenty years kept him still in close contact with crime, vice, and squalor, with physical wretchedness and moral depravity. Ranging the slums, sweatshops, factories, and police-stations of New York for stories of accident and crime, he became more and more impressed by the intolerable character of social conditions on the East Side. First with articles, then with books and lectures, he began the task of unsealing the eyes of the luckier half to the evils under which the unlucky labored.

For the time and place, Riis was an unsurpassed publicist. He was an enthusiast, but all great humanitarian movements require enthusiasm. Some men were repelled by the exuberance of his temperament, occasionally running over into sentimentality; but on the whole this exuberance simply made infectious the tenderness of his heart, the sensitiveness of his conscience. His first book, *How the Other Half Lives*, let in a burst of light upon tenement conditions in New York, and did more than anything else to prepare the way for the housing investigations and new tenement-house codes of the next decade. It coincided, as Miss Ware shows, with a great movement of the time to study society in pathological fashion; to examine the life of paupers, tramps, beggars, criminals, and outcasts generally; to probe for the source of the evils they represented. His book was not so thorough or scientific as the monumental studies Charles Booth was making of life and labor among the poor of East London; but it was nevertheless highly effective. Riis took his horrified readers to Gotham

Court, to Cherry Hill, to Little Italy, Chinatown, and Jewtown; to Murderers' Row, Mulberry Bend, and Hell's Kitchen. His pages were more eloquent than those of Altgeld's *Live Questions*—questions of housing, sweatshops, prostitution, justice, penal institutions in Chicago—which appeared that same year of 1890. For more than a decade a steady procession of books followed this first volume. Before the end of the century he was through with the daily drudgery of journalism; and from then until his death in 1914 he could use his pen and voice with complete freedom.

To some observers it seemed that Riis was inclined to overemphasize one aspect of the social problem, and to treat the crowded slum as the root of all evil. But that was a misreading of his doctrine. As he made plain in *The Battle with the Slum* (1902), and as Miss Ware here shows, he simply took the slum as the principal gauge of our urban civilization. He believed it intolerable that these dens of squalor, filth, vice, and crime should exist as great plague-spots side by side with the wealth, the artistic triumphs, and the robust cultural institutions of modern America. They must be wiped out, and the rate at which they were diminished would measure the progress of our struggle against poverty. He had no delusions as to the duration of this struggle. He wrote in this book: "We shall win, for we are not letting things be, the way our fathers did. But it will be a running fight, and it will not be won in two years, or in ten, or in twenty." He never believed the slum the sole root of social evil. On the contrary, he took pains to point to still more important roots, including liquor and (for America) unrestricted immigration. And as Lincoln Steffens and Miss Ware both show, he strove not for one reform but many. He proved the contamination of the city's water-supply, and did much to compel the purchase

of the Croton water-shed. With Abram S. Hewitt, he labored for small parks. With Theodore Roosevelt, he effected the abolition of the police lodging-houses, noisome incubators of disease and crime. He contended successfully for school playgrounds, and for opening school facilities to boys' and girls' clubs. With Richard Watson Gilder, Laurence Veiller, and others, he wrote a new housing code for the city. After a prolonged battle he wiped out Mulberry Bend, and substituted for it Mulberry Bend Park and the Jacob Riis Neighborhood Settlement.

In all these and other labors he was a joyous and kindly leader, never a Puritanical critic or arrogant censor. Many even of those he fought loved him. "What moved him most," John Haynes Holmes has truly said, "was the spectacle of helpless human beings robbed of that sheer joy of living which was his own richest treasure." Miss Ware's book shows how much he did to restore to these helpless ones their just heritage.

ALLAN NEVINS

FOREWORD

THE shadows of summer evening were reaching across a Long Island garden. In a little while it would be dark, and the small boy who was so active in one corner of the garden was putting hurried effort to his work. It would soon become difficult to see the worms as his energetic shovel turned them up, and he must get a proper supply of them if he were to start "first thing in the morning" on his fishing trip.

Having no desire to be used for bait, the worms were slow about offering themselves. He had turned over several square feet of earth and as yet had only a half dozen squirming victims in the tin can beside him. A little tired and much worried, he paused for a moment and straightened up.

Through the garden a man came toward him.

"What is it now?" asked the man.

"Worms for bait," replied the boy as he bent again to the digging.

The man stood beside him and watched for a few minutes, speaking once to point out a worm that the lad had missed. Finally, "When are you going fishing?" he asked.

"First thing in the morning, before breakfast; I wish the worms would show up more."

"Well," said the man, "I know a way to get them up in great shape. Let's try it."

Willingly the boy gave up the shovel. The man stepped to a piece of ground that had not yet been dug, forced the spade twelve or fifteen inches into the ground, and

then commenced to move the handle back and forth. The resulting jars at each end of the stroke shook the earth for four or five feet around. The boy watched curiously. Back and forth the man moved the spade, closely watching the surface of the ground.

"There's one," he said suddenly, stooping to pick up a panic-stricken worm which had hurried to the surface. "And there's another."

The boy was delightedly surprised.

"Hey, there are two more!" he cried. "Gee whizz, Pop, that's a peach of a way. Oh, look, another!"

"They think it's an earthquake," the man remarked conversationally, "and they come up to see where it is. Maybe they get squeezed a little, too, when they're underground."

A few minutes of this were enough to furnish worms for a long day's fishing. As man and boy walked together to put the spade away and to place the worms where they could be easily found in the dim light of the morning, the boy looked up, hopefully.

"Pop, come along to-morrow, will you?"

"Won't the other fellows mind?"

"Mind!" exclaimed the boy stoutly. "No, they wouldn't mind anyway, but they aren't going. I'm going alone. I've found a new pond I've been to only a couple of times. It's two miles down toward Jamaica, and, believe me, the fish bite there."

"All right, Billy, I'll come," said the man. "We'll start about six-thirty, hey, and I'll get Bertha to give us something to eat to take along."

"All right," said the boy. That was all he said, for he was not given to much self-expression. But his heart was light. To have his father go with him on one of these expeditions was an exciting and thrilling thing. His father

was always so busy or away, and the few times he could go along he was such a good scout and such an interesting fellow! And, too, his father had the standing in the house that enabled him actually to ask Bertha, the cook, to provide ample food for the breakfast, dinner, and in-between. That means much to a growing boy off for an all-day fishing trip.

"All right, Pop," said the boy. "I'll make the hooks after dinner to-night."

So next day the two went hand in hand through the fields, each carrying a maple pole, homemade, wound with the black thread that was the line. The boy carried the worms. The hooks the boy had made by heating needles in a candle and bending them to shape.

The two spent a happy morning at the pond, yanking out enough fat sunfish to satisfy both of them. Not until many years later, when the boy read the man's autobiography, did he discover that a million mosquitoes had attended the expedition, too, and had worked impartially and thoroughly on both of them. Man and boy were bitten and sunburned; but they were happy, too, as they walked home. It had been a good trip for both of them.

"Let's see if Bertha's got an old pail or something for an aquarium," said the boy, looking proudly down at the sunfish that pushed and flopped in the can that had held the worms.

"Why don't we take that old wash boiler from the tool shed and sink it in the ground by the beeches," suggested the man. "Let's make a regular aquarium right in the ground."

"Gee whizz, let's! And we'll line it with those shells you brought back from Denmark, and—and—"

Mutually planning, they came home. Now and then the boy's rather shy eyes would look up at the man. In

them was a look that spoke eloquently. Occasionally the man looked down at the boy—and in his eyes was the same look. Man and boy, father and son—yes, but play-mates at heart.

Twelve years ago, Paul Kellogg, editor of the *Survey Graphic*, asked me to write something about my father. In those twelve years, the paragraphs above are all that I have been able to manage. It is not easy for me to immobilize my father's personality on paper.

Now comes Miss Ware's biography. Since she began it in 1933 I have followed her work sympathetically, watching with admiration the thorough way in which she has examined every possible source of information, here and abroad. She has, I believe, achieved two distinct things: she has provided a clear perspective of the sociological movement of the '80s and '90s, and she has analytically placed my father in that movement. So far as I know, she is the first to treat that period successfully in such a manner; and, in view of the current trend toward federalization of local welfare work, this seems an important, timely contribution.

It has seemed to Miss Ware and to me that I might be able to add to her careful study a few touches of a more personal nature. In doing so, I am anxious to underline the fact that father was not a reformer, in the stuffily virtuous sense of that word. The mainspring of his hostility to the slum was a simple one. On Denmark's North Sea coast, the universe is only two parts: the high-arched blue sky, and the green and blue world. Going directly from that to a city's tenements, back alleys, and windowless rooms, father reacted indignantly and wholly. His passion was to give human beings decent chances for their living.

Himself on surprisingly direct terms with his God, he saw men literally as the children of God, and he was elementally angry at the conditions in which many were forced to live.

He had normal human failings. The professional, blue-law reformers who were constantly trying to enlist his support for one or another project did not realize this, and the results were sometimes unexpected. When his quick temper flamed, his language was spicy. There was a satisfying incident when a woman wrote to him that she had always admired Theodore Roosevelt, until she had heard that he said "damn" when he led his men up San Juan Hill. If that were so, she would regretfully be compelled to change her opinion of Colonel Roosevelt. Could Mr. Riis verify this upsetting rumor? Father's impatient answer was confined to this: "Dear Madam: I do not know whether or not Colonel Roosevelt said 'damn' when he went up San Juan Hill, but I know that I did when I read your letter."

In the 'gos, when I was a small boy at home, I was dimly conscious of the interest of the outside world in my father. I felt a remote resentment toward that interest, perhaps because it was always interrupting my play with him. It was doubtless that resentment which caused me to remark, at the age of five, that I could not understand why people "made so much fuss" over him. Nor could I. To me he was neither crusader nor public figure.

Back at the hazy threshold of my memory, father used to return from the city about the time when I was being put to bed. On the table by my bed he would place a tiny candle-stick on which a rabbit held up the very smallest of all candles. Lighting the nightly candle, he would start a story and spin it out while the little flame burned. The story grew into a continuous history of a highly superior

fox and his daily raids upon an inexhaustible community of ducks. He made up the story as he went along.

Not only was the story exciting in itself, but it was superbly told. Father was the best raconteur I ever heard; and when, as the candle flame flickered out, the fox snapped up two ducks in his mouth and one in each paw, he snapped them up so vividly that he has endured in all his life and color for four decades. Father brought in accessory characters, too—notably an owl. By way of general verification, we would walk on Sunday afternoons to a big hollow tree in the woods—The Owl Tree, he said. But my infant tongue and his pleased fancy fixed it permanently in the family life as The Rowl Tree.

Those story-evenings were the first evenings I knew, and I think of them as warm hours of enthralled interest and laughter.

It was in the summers that we were together. In the winters he was away on lecture tours, and I was away at school. His long, hand-written letters from all parts of the country delighted not only me, but all the other boys in the geography class, because the teacher suspended regular lessons and read the letters aloud. I had to sit beside her to render occasional help with his writing. Once during each winter he would speak at my school, and that was an event of glee and of agony for me—glee, because I always eagerly sought his company; agony, because I suffered from a comic fear that he would forget his lecture and be embarrassed before the school.

Of course, there were black moments among the gold—moments of discipline, as when I threw all his lead fishing weights into a neighboring green-house just to hear the tinkle of broken glass. On such occasions his discipline was swift, complete, and active. But I always knew he was

right; and our hours of companionship were far more numerous and strong.

One last incident I wish to describe, because it was very important to me, and because I am uncertain as to how frequently this kind of thing occurs between fathers and sons. Father was always the gayest of my playmates, and the most satisfying of my companions. Above and beyond that, however, was the startling illumination which broke over me one day when, abruptly, I realized that this man was more than playmate or companion or father—that he was a friend.

I was twenty years old. We were digging woodbine together, on our knees in the woods beside a Massachusetts brook. As we grubbed, we talked, not of any cosmic philosophy, but merely of the woodbine's preference for leaf mold to grow in; and we contrasted the black of the mold with the red of the vine in October. Why it should have come then I have no idea; but, sharp as a lightning stroke, I saw the man beside me as contemporary and friend. The realization was overwhelming. I said nothing, but I like to think he knew.

We finished digging up the woodbine roots, and we planted them along a stone wall by the farm. There they have lived and grown, rich and vigorous. In the autumn, they flame red along the hillside.

ROGER WILLIAM RIIS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A FULL-LENGTH biography of Jacob Riis had not yet been written. His autobiography, an amazingly revealing document, gives us the best study of his career to 1901. His books, *How the Other Half Lives*, *The Battle with the Slum* and other writings by him and about him supply additional material. But the later years were only sketched in magazine articles and editorials. There was as yet no coördinated account.

It seemed that the time had come to bring together the main facts of his life and, by painting his portrait against the background of his time, to evaluate his lasting contribution to American social reform.

Mr. Riis's family cordially gave their permission for the study and aided me in every way. Mrs. Riis, Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske, Mr. John Riis and his family, and Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre recalled incidents that might be of help and placed in my hands letters and other material. Mr. Roger William Riis gave hours of time to help me construct a true picture—without his assistance the book could not have been written.

To several members of the Columbia University faculty I am deeply grateful. Professor Allan Nevins suggested the subject and advised me in the research. His enthusiasm and wise counsel were an inspiration. Professor David S. Muzzey read the manuscript and offered me encouragement. Professors Evarts B. Greene and A. A. Tenney helped in many ways.

I want to express my appreciation to the following men

and women who knew Mr. Riis and shared their memories with me: Miss Lillian D. Wald, Miss Jane Addams, Dr. John H. Finley, Mr. Homer Folks, Mr. Laurence Veiller, Dr. Edward T. Devine, Mr. Norman Hapgood, Mr. John M. Glenn, Mr. Max Fischel. Through their reminiscences I felt personally transported back to Mulberry Street and the 1890's. More than a word of thanks should go to Dr. Jane E. Robbins, the "Dear Doctor" of the letters. She took great pains to recall significant facts, and, with this in view, made a special visit to Ribe while attending a medical congress at Copenhagen.

Mr. H. M. Anderson, Mr. Charles Still, Mr. William Drennan, Mr. Herman Roth of the *Sun* staff were of particular help. Mrs. Ruth Bryan Owen, United States Minister to Denmark, and her staff made a thoughtful report on the Danish background; and Mr. George Bech, Danish Consul, helped in similar ways. Miss Rosamond Gilder dug down in old files and located letters which Mr. Riis had written to her father; these she graciously shared with me.

Many others assisted: Mr. Walter Pettit, Associate Director of the New York School of Social Work, helped me to begin the study; Mr. A. Willumsen of the Cathedral School at Ribe searched old records; Miss Marian Schibsbys translated some letters written in Danish; Miss Kate H. Claghorn and Miss Bertha C. Pedersen gave accounts of the Richmond Hill days; the pastor of the Domkirke and the Reverend Arthur R. Cummings of the Church of the Resurrection supplied information from the registers; Mr. Louis H. Pink suggested additional resources. Miss Margaret Ladd Franklin read the manuscript critically and advised me regarding form. Miss Marguerite Schneider and my sister, Ethel Kime Ware, read the manuscript carefully and made valuable suggestions. Miss Elizabeth Van

Beuren was of great assistance in typing the material. My mother gave me, as usual, her encouragement.

I am indebted to Mrs. Bertha F. Hulseman and the members of her staff at the Russell Sage Foundation Library, to the Theodore Roosevelt House librarian, to the librarians of the Columbia School of Journalism, to the Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement staff, to the American Scandinavian Foundation staff, to Mr. Svend Waendelin, Archivist of the Dan-America Archives Society at Aalborg, Denmark, for assistance in research.

I want to thank the following publishers who gave me permission to quote excerpts from books and articles by and about Mr. Riis, as indicated in the text: The Macmillan Company; Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.; The Dial Publishing Company; D. Appleton-Century Company; the New York *Times*; *The Sun*; the New York *Herald Tribune*; *The Forum*; The Outlook Publishing Company, Inc.; the *Standard-Times*; *The Digest*; *The Sunday School Times*; Survey Associates; Charles Scribner's Sons; the New York *World Telegram*; the Toledo *News Bee*; The Curtis Publishing Company; *The Nation*; *The Atlantic Monthly*.

If the material herein contained has faults, they are in no way traceable to the splendid company of men and women who have tried to give a picture of the personality of "Jake" Riis. I only regret that there is no way to register the twinkle in the eye, and the warmth of tone in the voice, of his friends when they speak of him. That in itself would be the strongest testimony to his personal place. As for his accomplishments, they must speak for themselves in the following chapters.

L. W.

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CH.

Boyhood in Ribe

I

TWENTY-ODD years have passed since the brisk step of Jacob A. Riis, police reporter, sounded on the stairways of Mulberry Street. He would have been an old man now—but no, that would be inconceivable. Jacob Riis would never have grown old. He was not made that way. Life was for him a zestful adventure. Happiness in plenty he experienced, heartbreaking sorrow came his way; but no matter what the condition he pursued his tasks with the hope for better days to come. There was the fighting temper of hero Danes in his battle with the slum, and the joy of battle remained with him to the end. It is in the attempt to catch something of his buoyant spirit that we travel back to 1849 and begin the journey of life with him, over the way now hard, now long, but rarely without its promise of victory ahead.

2

Jacob Riis was a Dane—and his ancestors were Danes. It was a sturdy stock—mostly farmers, with here and there a civil servant, a baker, a distiller of spirits, or a soldier. Love of country and loyalty to the king were ingrained. If there was in any line of our hero's inheritance a serious offender against the law, the name does not appear in available records. In short, Jacob's forebears were a

self-respecting lot of whom he may well have been proud.¹

Jacob's paternal grandfather was a prosperous farmer and small distiller. The fact of his prosperity is the more interesting in the light of the poverty which many Danish farmers experienced in the period after the Napoleonic Wars. His wife has been described as a "little wise fine lady, well-bred" and "she could make verses."² They believed in a good education for their son Niels Edward and set aside a special room in the farm-house where he could study without interruption.

The maternal grandfather, Herr P. V. Lundholme, was at one time warden at Kronborg, Hamlet's castle; his daughter Carolina—Jacob's mother—was born within the castle walls.³ In later years he moved the family to a farm, where he became a baker as well as a farmer; but times were hard in the 1830's, and eventually Herr Lundholme and his wife Sophie Hedvig gave up their home in the country and moved to Copenhagen. This last step was disastrous to the family pocket-book. It was all they could do to keep Carolina in school.

Niels Edward Riis, Jacob's father, showed a bent for literary work and study. In 1833 he won honors at the local school and in 1843 was a candidate in philology. According to family accounts, he was not only a master of Latin and Greek but was well versed in history and current affairs. We find him in 1844-45 teaching at Roskilde, an old town, twenty miles from Copenhagen.⁴ By this time he was in love with pretty Carolina Bendsine Lundholme.

Carolina had felt the pinch of hard times. In spite of

¹ Genealogical information procured by Mr. R. W. Riis (R. W. Riis collection).

² Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre's letter to Mr. R. W. Riis.

³ She was born on June 20, 1823 (Latin School records); Dr. Jane E. Robbins' interviews with Mr. Riis's sisters, August, 1934.

⁴ Latin School records (Mr. Willumsen's letter).

the reduced circumstances of the family, however, she had been sent to the "Queen's School."⁵ at Copenhagen. She had prepared herself for teaching and upon completion of her course had become a governess. She was described as a cheerful young woman with a gift for spinning a yarn.⁶ She could fascinate any audience with her tales of Elsinore and Hamlet's father's ghost.

Of the circumstances of the meeting between Niels and Carolina and of the progress of the courtship, we know nothing; we have only the date of the marriage—October 12, 1844.

In 1846, Niels Edward Riis obtained a post at the Ribe Latin School, a centuries-old preparatory institution partly subsidized by the state. He and his wife and child moved to Ribe in the summer of that year, and it was here that—on May 3, 1849—Jacob, their third child, was born.

3

Ribe is an old cathedral town, situated in the southwest part of Jutland, a few miles from the Schleswig border.⁷ Kings once made it their place of residence. In the 1840's the days of glory were gone, but the town retained much of its ancient appearance. Rows of gabled houses lined the cobblestoned streets. Quaint little shops offered their wares. Storks perched one-legged on chimney tops. One building alone towered high over the others; it was the Domkirke, the Lutheran Church, once a Roman Catholic cathedral. Any day the visitor could see leisurely towns-

⁵ Genealogical information in R. W. Riis collection.

⁶ Dr. Jane E. Robbins' interviews with relatives in Ribe, August, 1934.

⁷ C. H. Scott, *The Danes and the Swedes* (London, 1856), pp. 25-196; J. Brochner, *Danish Life in Town and Country*; W. J. Harvey and C. Reppien, *Denmark and the Danes* (New York, 1915), pp. 335-337, 346; J. A. Riis, *The Old Town* (New York, 1910), p. 190; J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901), pp. 1-18; "Denmark, 1934" (published by the Royal Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs).

folk going about their duties: jolly shopkeepers, the miller, the pastor, the country doctor, the apothecary, the schoolmaster, the housewife. In all there were some three thousand souls. Now and then the peace was broken by a clattering of hoofs on the cobblestones as a bellowing herd of cattle was driven through the town. Again, the stage-coach would rattle to a final stop. At night the watchman would call the time in song, "Ho, watchman, heard ye the clock strike ten? This hour is worth the knowing. . . ." ⁸

During the early part of 1849 the usual calm of Ribe was shaken. In 1848 a new king, Frederick VII, had come to the throne and had granted a liberal constitution. Under the new system the province of Schleswig, a Danish possession for centuries, was permitted to have local autonomy, though remaining an integral part of Denmark. This was the psychological moment for the Prussians, with their rising spirit of nationalism, to aid the Schleswig people in an attempt to break away. By 1849 a state of war existed between Denmark and Prussia. Thus, in the year of Jacob's birth the scene was none too peaceful. The difficulties, however, were soon smoothed out for the time being, with the help of Russian and English diplomacy; the old town slipped back into its accustomed peace, and Jacob's early boyhood was spent in a delightful calm where one day melted into another.

4

The baby was christened Jacob Augustus Riis at the Domkirke on July 8, 1849. He was the third in a family of fourteen children. In addition there was a foster-daughter, Herr Riis's orphaned niece. Most of the children died, however, either in childhood or in early maturity,

⁸ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 403. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

so that besides Jacob only Sofie, the youngest, and Emma remained.⁹

We have little information about the family relationships in those earliest years beyond what Jacob himself has recalled. Mrs. Riis was a motherly person, busy with meeting the needs of her big family. She did find time, however, to tell stories to the youngsters, and Jacob always felt her interest in his activities and ambitions. We know little of the relationships among the children beyond the fact that they enjoyed games together; but it is certain that, as the years went by, Emma and Jacob became great friends. Both parents were indulgent toward their children, and we get an impression of affectionate family life. It was not, however, until he was grown up that Jacob became conscious of the strong bond between him and his father.

In time the Riises moved from the old cottage near the Domkirke to a rented house on Blackfriars Street. Here the floors were bare except for one carpet that orna-

⁹ Miss Emma Reinsholm made the following list of the Riis children, on March 17, 1925 (R. W. Riis collection):

Peter Ditler Theodor Riis	b. in Roskilde 16 April 1845	d. in Ribe 10 May 1875
Sofus Charles	b. 17 April 1847 in Ribe	d. 11 Dec. 1874
Jacob August	b. 3 May 1849 in Ribe	d. 25 May 1914 in America
Theodor Emil	b. 20 Mar. 1851	drowned 6 July (1860?)
Johan Nicolai	b. 5 Feb. 1853	d. 10 Feb. 1853
Peter Vilhelm Sixtus	b. 5 Feb. 1854	d. 11 Jan. 1885
Charlotte Emilie	b. 23 Oct. 1855	d. 15 Jan. 1870
Augusta Mathilda	b. 5 Sept. 1857	d. 20 Sept. 1857
Carl Edward Nonus	b. 24 March 1859	d. 8 Dec. 1879
A deadborn daughter	28 Sept. 1860	
Theodore Frederik	b. 26 Dec. 1861	d. 8 Jan. 1880
Henrik Emil	b. 4 May 1863	d. 6 Dec. 1863
Henrik Emil	b. 16 April 1865	d. 28 June 1869
Hedevig Sofie	b. 14 April 1867	
Emma Reinsholm (foster-daughter)	b. 24 Nov. 1853	

(See also Church records for Jacob's christening.)

mented the "spare room." The professor's pay was too small to cover the expenses of a growing family, and he eked out the income by translating messages washed up in bottles from the sea. He also made a few dollars by doing hack-work for the town newspaper. But apparently with all his efforts there was not enough. One of the standing anecdotes in later years was the tale of how Herr Riis came home one day with a bolt of green cloth salvaged from the sea which he had bought at a reduced price.¹⁰ Whereupon all the little Riis children appeared like so many peas in a pod with their new suits of green! Again, Jacob writes of how he and his brothers had no overcoats one cold winter and of how he conceived the idea of concealing his shame by forming a Spartan club in which no member would be caught wearing a coat.¹¹

When Jacob was six years old he was led by the maid-of-all-work to the house of a woman teacher. If his memory of his first day at school is to be trusted, he was thrust into a hogshead as a warning to all bad boys!

In 1858, when he was nine,¹² he entered the Latin School. Here his father kept an eye on him, hoping that he would equip himself for teaching or for some other profession. Jacob was not particularly interested in going to school, however; at this stage his chief enjoyments were running and jumping and playing robbers. He attended regularly because it was expected of him, and his record was a little more than fair. He had a thorough grounding in the classics and studied Danish composition and English among other subjects. Here are some excerpts from the class-room records:

¹⁰ Letter from J. A. Riis to Miss Emma Reinsholm, June 28, 1909 (Dan-America Museum, Aalborg, Denmark).

¹¹ J. A. Riis, *The Old Town*, pp. 137-138.

¹² Letter from M. Willumsen, Nov. 20, 1933; information from Latin School record books.

- 1861 9/11 J. Riis and L. Berg showed such unseemly behavior that I found it advisable to dismiss them from the class room—[Signed] Trugaard.
- 1862 9/1 Riis and Rosenstand without pencil—N. E. Riis.
- 9/24 Riis without a pen—N. E. Riis.
- 10/16 Riis has forgotten his book—N. E. Riis.
- 1863 1/23 Riis ill—N. E. Riis.
- 2/7 Riis has neglected a written assignment—N. E. Riis.
- 3/19 Riis inattentive—N. E. Riis.
- 5/18 Riis has failed to write his Danish composition.
- 12/1 Vesterby, Winding, Rosenstand, Hansen and Riis, disobedient. J. Koch.
- 1864 2/5 J. Riis wholly unprepared in Greek grammar. Bendsen.
- 3/19 Enberg and Riis did not bring New Testament—J. K.

Good Pastor Koch of the Domkirke had a fellow-feeling for the boys in the school, and every now and then he would proclaim an afternoon holiday. Then the boys would go nutting in the near-by woods, or they would dig for treasure on Castle Hill.

In his spare time Jacob liked to read: ¹³ Dickens was a great favorite with him, and he could hardly wait for the issues of "All The Year Round" to arrive in the mail from London. James Fenimore Cooper was another favorite; Uncas and Chingachgook were like members of the boy's own family. By reading in English he obtained a fluency in the language which stood him in good stead in later years. Of Danish writers, Hans Christian Andersen was the one he most loved; the story of the brave little fir tree he read over and over.

¹³ J. A. Riis, *The Old Town*, p. 73.

Of all the year Christmas was ever the happiest time. Mrs. Riis and the hired girl would make up a great batch of spice cakes, and the parents would skimp to buy toys for the children. On Christmas Eve the family would trudge to the Domkirke where the old carols were sung. After the service they would return home for the big dinner; but before the children could sit down to the table they must carry a bowlful of goodies to the attic for Yule Nissen, the Christmas elf.

It was the custom of the town to give a great ball the day after Christmas, and for this occasion Jacob's father and mother dressed up in their shabby best and walked, or rode if times were good, to the hall. Usually Ribe paid little heed to class differences. There were, it is true, three groups—the officials and the clergy, the factory masters and the merchants, and the laboring folk. Ordinarily the differences were not sharply defined; but on this one occasion considerable formality was felt, and Herr Riis, as schoolmaster, took his place in the first group. The little Riises stayed at home; but Jacob tells us that lying in his bed in the attic he got a thrill as if he, too, were going when he heard his excited parents hurrying away.

It was at the age of eleven or twelve that Jacob first became aware of the existence of tenement life.¹⁴ Looking at Ribe with its neat homes and flower gardens, the outsider could scarcely believe that overcrowding and poverty existed there; but the cheerful front sometimes hid an empty cupboard, and the town had its records of those in distress. One house in particular stood out from the rest. It was a dingy old dwelling, nicknamed "Rag Hall." For some time he had noticed this building as he passed by. One year, he writes, as Christmas approached, he stood in front of it, amazed at the spectacle of dirt which he saw.

¹⁴ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 8-10.

In his pocket, he recalls, was a coin—equivalent to a twenty-five-cent piece—which he had received as a gift. Suddenly he knew how he wanted to spend his precious money. He knocked at the door of one family, he says, and to the astonishment of the inhabitants, offered them his worldly wealth on condition that they would clean up the house. The surprised tenants looked at him dully for a moment, reached for the coin, and began to get out mop and pail. Later he told his mother, and she went to help with the cleaning.

Somewhere Jacob acquired a dog whom he named Othello, and they became great companions. He had other pets, too. The starlings were his especial joy, and he built a nest outside his window, placing in it a piece of paper with the words: "This nest is for starlings but by the great horn spoon not for sparrows."¹⁵

When Jacob was eleven, the first great tragedy occurred in the family. Little Theodor Emil, the boy just younger than Jacob, fell into the slip near the house and was drowned. Jacob could never forget the picture of his mother as she listened to the men dragging the water to recover the body. Years afterward he could see her sorrowing eyes looking at the empty chair of the little brother.

5

In 1864, war broke out between Denmark on the one hand and Prussia and Austria on the other over the Schleswig-Holstein question. Jacob was still in Latin School but his parents had difficulty in restraining him from joining the army as a volunteer. His willingness to fight in his country's brave but losing battle was indicative not only of his patriotic feeling but also of the restless

¹⁵ J. A. Riis, *The Old Town*, p. 4. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

spirit which had overtaken him. The time had come when he wanted to leave school.

Herr Riis had hoped that this son would become a literary man, but he did not insist. He finally apprenticed Jacob to a carpenter in the town, and a short time later allowed him to go to Copenhagen to continue his training.

The war had marked a turning-point in Denmark's economic history. For some years after the Napoleonic Wars she had made progress in recovery, but the recent experience had crippled her. Forced to condense her population into narrower boundaries, and prompted by the spirit of a new day, the country was beginning to turn to greater developments of agriculture and industry. Within a few years the great coöperative movements were to begin. Already the drift toward the cities had begun, and thousands were finding their way in to the busy centers. Jacob was one of many who migrated there.

In his autobiography Riis tell of an incident which we may suppose hastened his departure. At sixteen he was in love with young Elisabeth Gjortz, the factory-master's thirteen-year-old adopted daughter. Elisabeth merely tossed her head at his attentions, and Herr Gjortz did not treat the matter seriously. Matters might have taken their course, however, had it not been that one evening in the ball-room Jacob, acting as master of ceremonies, ordered Herr Gjortz off the floor, bidding him wait until the hour for the elders to appear. This behavior created an unpleasant situation, and Jacob was doubtless glad of a chance to leave the town.

6

Copenhagen in the period when Riis was there (1865-69) was a cosmopolitan city.¹⁶ There were ships from all

¹⁶ J. O. Choules, *The Cruise of the Steam Yacht North Star* (Boston,

parts of the world; there were museums and castles; there were parks, theaters, concerts, and lectures. But even more interesting to the student of sociology is the change that was taking place in the social life at that time.¹⁷ In the decade from 1860 to 1870, Copenhagen's population¹⁸ rose from 163,000 to 198,000. After the war of 1864, a number of families from the conquered provinces and elsewhere sought homes in the city. Rents went up, and many poor persons were thrown out of their homes or were forced to crowd together in inadequate dwellings. Two and three families occupied quarters suitable only for one. Some attention had been focused on housing and on sanitation after the cholera epidemic of 1853. In 1865, to help meet the housing problem, the members of a Working-man's Society, organized five years before, began a program of building. They constructed fifteen one-storied brick houses with slate roofs, containing 112 tenements with an average of two rooms and a kitchen to a family. But it was obvious that there was still a shortage.

The city had its other social problems, too. A large pauper element was dependent upon it for support. According to the Danish Constitution of 1866 any person who could prove his need was entitled to help. Under this act, a total of 11,322 persons, or 6.7 per cent of the population of the city, received either indoor or outdoor relief in 1866.¹⁹ The city had its workhouse for vagrants, its orphanages, its charity wards in hospitals, its home for

1854), pp. 110-111, 149-157; Bayard Taylor, *Northern Travel* (New York, 1902), pp. 229-234.

¹⁷ H. L. Westergaard, *Economic Development in Denmark Before and During the World War* (Oxford, 1922). Also *Denmark, Its Medical Organization, Hygiene and Demography* (Copenhagen, 1891); *Résumé des Principaux Statistiques du Danemark* (Copenhagen, 1874).

¹⁸ H. L. Westergaard, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Denmark, Its Medical Organization, etc.*, p. 253.

mental defectives, and many other institutions, Urbanization carried with it its toll of misfits.

Curiously enough, young Jacob appears not to have been aware of these social conditions, which were almost identical with those that shocked him into action a few years later in New York. There is no evidence that he noticed the overcrowding, the children going to work in the mills, the bodies of paupers being carried from the city's hospitals to their graves. How much of all this he may unconsciously have absorbed we shall probably never know.

For details of these Copenhagen days we must rely on the autobiography. Several anecdotes are there related. We find him, one night at the theater, so gripped by the play that he shouted out and was escorted to the nearest exit. On another occasion he spent his last penny on a bouquet for Elisabeth, who had come to Copenhagen to school; but, he adds, the bouquet was sadly ineffective—she departed for Ribe without giving him any encouragement.

Having completed his apprenticeship,²⁰ Jacob had but one thought, to return to Ribe. This he did in 1869. It was his plan to become a carpenter in the town and, if all went well, to marry Elisabeth. But Ribe was none too prosperous, and he found it difficult to get work. He did not wish to be a burden on his family. To make his situation worse, Elisabeth turned him down. She was then only seventeen and not interested in marrying any one—and her family evidently exerted some pressure.

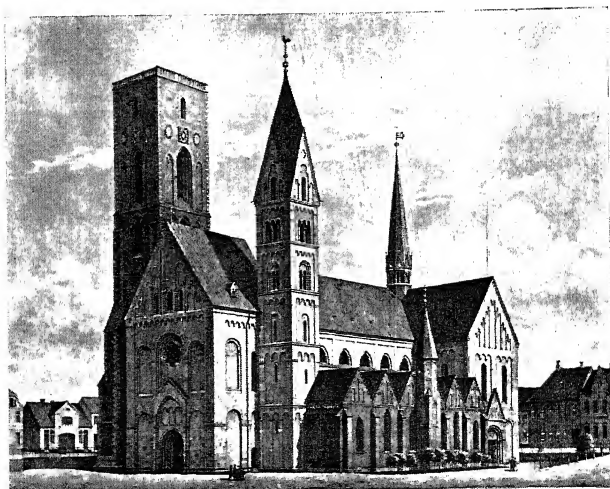
What should he do? To stay in Ribe seemed impossible under the circumstances. Copenhagen did not appear to offer anything better. He was nearly twenty-one now,

²⁰ He was enrolled in the Guild (J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 32).



Courtesy Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement

EARLY CHILDHOOD HOME OF JACOB A. RIIS
IN RIBE



Courtesy Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement

THE DOMKIRKE, RIBE, WHERE JACOB A. RIIS WAS
CHRISTENED AND MARRIED

strong, although slight in build. Perhaps he should try a far-away place where good fortune might come.

So it happened that, in the spring of 1870, he decided to go to Copenhagen, and from there sail to the United States. He had heard that work was plentiful in America; surely somebody would need a young carpenter with his tools. As the days slipped quickly by, he had a few regrets; but on the whole he was glad he was going. On the last Sunday before he left, he knelt at the altar in the Domkirke. As it happened, Elisabeth knelt beside him at the Communion rail; it was a doubly reverent moment.

The day of parting came. He tells how²¹ his mother helped him tuck the last pieces into his trunk while his father sat silent. His Ribe friends had clubbed together to give him a little money; his own small store, less than fifty dollars, must go to pay for his steerage ticket. The neighbors' gift of forty dollars²² weighed substantially in his trousers' pocket.

The following boyish letter²³ was written at Copenhagen while he waited for the steamer:

Copenhagen, May 4, 1870

DEAR FRIENDS—

... I thank you heartily for your pleasant surprise, that you so kindly sent me on my birthday. This evening I felt that something was going to happen and I was not mistaken. This evening I was so nervous that I smoked three cigars in one hour as I waited for half-past ten. Then came Miss Nanna Ferslew from the compartment and out of her right hand pocket she took a portrait for me and out of her left pocket a letter for me and out of goodness knows what pocket came a package for me and I left the station loaded and happy as a porter who has cheated a poor traveller. I don't only thank you for the lovely portrait but also for your kind

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

wishes. Honestly I have thought many a time that it was a shame I didn't have your respective photographs. I would surely have asked you for one had I been able to give you one in return. I have one and if you would care for it, it is yours, but you shall each have one as soon as possible even though it should be American. (I suppose that doesn't matter.)

I don't suppose that for many years we shall meet again, maybe never. It was a pleasant winter we spent together at home. If I could stand it, it was thanks to your friendship and I thank you for this friendship. But we must keep smiling. Let it be as it will, it cannot be worse than on "Peter"; but we shall get over it, even if we land in the gutter once or twice. Maybe some day good will come from the old "Riis" but at least I have not forgotten my religion or the 11th commandment: "Du sollst dich nicht fösblaffen lassen." It is good to have something to cling on to in this life and especially in America. They are all thought to be fast, what do you think? It would be safer to go with two revolvers in each trouser pocket and coat pocket! And waistcoat pocket! and one might take a small knife between one's teeth. . . . She has a good knife there, it will sever a person in two minutes. Now I have said enough and will close with a hearty good wish for a happy future to you all, God willing that some day again we may meet, but if not, accept again my heartiest thanks for all your kindness and so live in God's name for ever and

Yours sincerely

JACOB A. RIIS

7

One day in the middle of May, 1870, Jacob Riis walked up the gang-plank to the steerage quarters of the ship. In his pocket were three treasures: the little roll of bills, letters to family acquaintances in New York, and a cherished gold locket containing a shining wisp of Elisabeth's hair which Mrs. Gjortz had sympathetically given him at the last moment.

The steamer went to Glasgow; and Riis sailed from there on May 18, 1870. By that time the immigrant

quarters were becoming irksome to the active young Dane. Upstairs in the first class, at least ten names of well-to-do people of the day were listed; ²⁴ but Riis's immediate world was bounded by nonentities and unpalatable food.

The conditions which Riis found on this ship were not unusual for that day.²⁵ They were a part of the great immigration problem which had existed for some years. As yet, no effort had been made to limit the number of persons flocking to America, and ship capacities were taxed to give accommodation to these travelers. While in 1865 not quite a quarter of a million immigrants entered the country, the number had risen with each succeeding year until in the early seventies the total for a single year was as high as 460,000.²⁶ There were no pecuniary qualifications for entrance to this country except that New York, California, and Louisiana imposed a head tax until, on March 20, 1876, such legislation was pronounced by the Supreme Court to be unconstitutional.²⁷

²⁴ New York *Daily Tribune*, June 6, 1870; *The Sun*, June 6, 1870.

²⁵ H. P. Fairchild (Ed.), *Immigrant Backgrounds* (New York, 1927), ch. xv by H. G. Leach, "The Scandinavians"; A. Nevins, *The Emergence of Modern America* (New York, 1932), p. 49.

²⁶ A. Nevins, *op. cit.*, p. 49. (About 125,000 Scandinavians entered the United States in the first half of the seventies.)

²⁷ Report of the Commissioner General of Immigration (1930), p. 5.

CHAPTER II

The Young Carpenter Lands in America; Odd Jobs

THE morning of June 4, 1870, arrived, and the ship was near land. All over the steamer the good news spread; down in the steerage tired men and women bundled up their belongings and waited. Time dragged by; word came that fog was tying up the harbor. For twenty-four long hours the ship was delayed; then at last she moved past the green hills of Brooklyn and nosed her way into the slip at Castle Garden, the Battery, where busy longshoremen tied her fast.

It was Whitsunday, June 5, 1870.¹ Alternate showers and sunshine poured down on the ship as the crowd of glad passengers caught sight of buildings and solid ground.

Having deposited his belongings in a rooming house, Riis went out to explore the city. At a corner he read the sign "Broadway." At that time the busiest portion of Broadway stretched from the Battery to 14th Street and Union Square, although some business firms and a few theaters were located a number of blocks beyond. Far uptown was Central Park, where richly dressed New Yorkers were in the habit of driving in their broughams or landaus, driven by liveried coachmen behind spanking teams.

In 1870, the building up of great American fortunes, unknown before the Civil War, had begun.² Throughout

¹ New York *Daily Tribune*, June 6, 1870.

² A. Nevins, *The Emergence of Modern America* (New York, 1932); A. M. Schlesinger, *Political and Social History of the United States—*

the country there was a feverish eagerness to get rich. At Washington certain congressmen were known to be conniving with lobbyists; votes for enormous appropriations were bought with cigars, costly dinners, and money bribes.

America was having growing pains. Towns which heretofore had housed a scant 10,000 or so now rapidly became large cities. Countrymen newly arrived in town filled the rooming houses to overflowing. European and Asiatic immigrants were filling up the dirty tenements of New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and a dozen or more of the large cities.

Economically, the country was in an unstable condition. A slump after the Civil War had been followed by a boom. In 1870, business was, in the main, on the upturn; but the ascent was too sharp—conservative men predicted that reaction was to follow before long. Partly because of the rural unemployed who had been flocking to the cities since the Civil War, and partly because of the strong urban trend in general, New York found itself with a large number of jobless men. The Bowery was crowded with ragged forms, and the outlook for a youth of twenty-one arriving from Denmark was not hopeful.

Happily for his state of mind, Jacob Riis did not know much about the serious economic situation, and could begin his search for work with a light heart.³ He had enough command of English to make himself understood, although he spoke with a marked Danish accent; and in his pocket were letters to the Danish Consul and to a Mr.

1829-1925 (New York, 1932), pp. 280-295; C. G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era* (New York, 1929).

³ The information regarding his experiences contained in the next few pages, unless otherwise indicated, has largely been procured from Mr. Riis's autobiography, *The Making of an American* (The Macmillan Company, publishers), and from many of his writings and lectures which repeat numerous incidents. Other accounts available for that particular phase of his career are negligible.

Goodall (later President of the American Bank Note Company) who had been a friend of the Riis family since some of the Ribe men had saved him from shipwreck. It turned out that both the Consul and Mr. Goodall were in Europe and Riis was stranded in New York without a single friend; but he did not lose heart. He went from one place of business to another asking for a job.

Four days went by and still he was jobless. His capital had dwindled to the vanishing point; meals began to be further apart and more meager. He wondered whether he had made a mistake in coming at all. At least he would have had a roof over his head in Ribe.

On the fifth day he paused in front of Castle Garden, where he saw a little crowd of men jostling one another. He heard them laughing and talking about a free ride. It seemed that some person was getting up a gang of men to go to the Brady's Bend Iron Works on the Allegheny River. It often happened, during this period of industrial history, that workmen were corralled in cities, and, for the promise of a job, agreed to go to a distant point on condition that railroad fare would be paid. The wages offered were pitifully low, but to the transients in the cities any sum paid often seemed a means of escape from a worse lot; and in this spirit many were willing to board the next train.

To young Riis, the prospect of a job in Pennsylvania looked like a God-given opportunity; and he stood in line along with some twenty others, waiting to receive a ticket. A short time later he was on the train bound for his first job in America. He flattened his face against the car window to peer out on the open fields or at station platforms. What was his amazement all along the railroad route to see the men who had accepted tickets scramble off one by one! When at last the train pulled into the shed near

Brady's Works, out of all those who had received tickets at New York, two lone passengers, Riis and a ship acquaintance, Adler, picked up their belongings and reported for carpentry work.

His new job gave him a tremendous feeling of satisfaction. All day he pounded at hard labor and was glad to be alive. But when night came on, it was a different story. Twilight drifted down over the hills and cast its long shadows over his heart. Flat sea-girt Denmark seemed far away indeed from this land of Pennsylvania uplands. Had he known more about the America of this decade, of factories turning out thousands of tons of iron and steel for great bridges and ships, he might have been thrilled; consciousness of his part in the great development of the nation might have cheered him through the lonely evenings. But he had no glimpse of the great machine growth that was then in progress, save through the humble medium of his carpenter's tools; his immediate world was bounded by restless and discontented workmen who desired better wages and greater security. He felt hemmed in; around him frogs croaked their monotonous songs, and the night insects chirped. He would fall asleep at last, dreaming of home and Elisabeth. There is no indication as to whether he heard from his people often. Certain it is that, in the months which followed, his pride kept him from informing them of his straits.

After a few days spent at carpentry work at Brady's, he asked his employer to let him try coal-mining. He thought he could make more money at piece-work, so much per ton. One morning he entered the gloomy chambers of the mine. Yawning caverns and dim recesses opened up before him. All day, along with the other men, he dug at the back-breaking labor and wished for quitting time to come. He knew by now that he was not cut out for this kind of

work, and as soon as he returned to the plant he asked to have his old job back. His day's work at mining had netted the munificent sum of sixty cents.

He was apparently planning to remain indefinitely at Brady's Bend. But on July 19, 1870, news reached the plant that France had declared war on Prussia. This meant that possibly Denmark, too, remembering Schleswig-Holstein, might join the side of France in the hope of regaining her lost provinces. Upon hearing the news, Riis impulsively dropped his tools, rushed to the office, where he drew his wages of \$10.63, and hurried off to board the first train. His money took him only as far as Buffalo; he there pawned his trunk and his watch so that he could buy a ticket to New York.

When he reached New York, he had exactly one penny in his pocket; but he did not mind, for he expected to be in the army immediately. He put up at a boarding-house, where the rate was to be one dollar a day, and then hastened to the Danish Consul's office. There he was received unenthusiastically by a clerk who registered his desire to serve and then indicated that the interview was over. Somewhat baffled, he next went to the French Consul who told him he was not fitting out men, and politely but firmly closed the door on the would-be soldier.

Now thoroughly chagrined, he wandered into the street, hardly knowing which way to turn. Three gold balls caught his eye, and he stepped into a pawnshop where he parted with his two prized possessions, a revolver and a pair of top-boots. The money would help to pay his room rent. Returning to the boarding-house he handed the small sum to his landlady. It was not enough, and she angrily put him out of the house. That night he wandered about the city streets utterly forlorn; in his hand he clutched his

old gripsack, which contained the last of his extra belongings—a linen duster and a pair of socks.

Hardly knowing where he went, he reached Clinton Street and paused before a door where he heard the sounds of laughing voices and tinkling glass. It was a Frenchmen's Society having a reception. In desperation he knocked at the door and was admitted. To the astonished gathering he expressed his desire to serve in the army. Blank stares gave way to amusement as the youth persisted. After some moments, however, the guests became annoyed, and as a result an altercation followed, during which the insistent young man was thrown out. As he moved away from the building, shadowy figures of the early morning hours crept past him.

His hope was for the moment gone. In despair he decided to leave town and hunt work in the country. There at least some farmer might need a field hand. With this resolve he trudged up Third Avenue toward the city limits. On and on he went past the gloomy buildings and flickering lights. When he reached the Bronx River, he bathed, dressed, and then stumbled on, weak with hunger. By noon he had reached Fordham College; there a priest caught sight of him and gave him a good solid meal. Riis was so touched by this kindness that in after years he attributed his religious tolerance to the sympathy of the man who fed him that day.

Leaving the college grounds, he walked along the railroad tracks toward the open fields. A few miles up the road, he hired himself to a farmer to pick cucumbers. But a broiling sun beat down on his head and soon discouraged his enthusiasm, so that he gave up this job and went in search of another. Odd jobs in Mt. Vernon were all he could get and he finally returned in the rain to New York with a capital of twenty-five cents in change.

Again he was wandering about the city streets. He was weak from hunger; it did not seem possible to hold out much longer. He was ashamed to let his family know of his plight. Then one morning he read in *The Sun* that a volunteer regiment was being fitted out to go to France. With high hopes he climbed the stairs to the newspaper office. As he stood at the threshold he made a sorry figure, in top-boots and a crumpled linen duster.

Charles A. Dana, the editor, was in his office. He listened to Riis's request to be taken on for war service. More intently, however, he stared at the soiled linen duster and at the two hollow eyes set in the gaunt cheeks. Finally, he reached in his pocket, pulled out a dollar bill, and extended it toward Riis. It was too much for the poor fellow, who wanted war service, not alms. He spurned the money and hurried from the office.

At a near-by pawnshop he left his last extra belongings, receiving a dollar in exchange. Almost ravenous, he spent seventy-five cents of the money for a square meal. Then, feeling somewhat improved, he spent the remaining twenty-five cents on a ticket to Perth Amboy, where he had heard he might get work. At Pfeiffer's clay-bank he did find a job, but he found the employees rowdy, and his employer, he tells us, failed to pay him.⁴ After two days he walked on to New Brunswick where, when night came, he slept on a tombstone slab in the cemetery, and ate windfall apples to stay his empty stomach.

At Little Washington he found work at a brick-yard, and he was employed there for six weeks. Then one day he heard that a company of volunteers was to sail from New York to France. Again he gave up his job and set out

⁴ Years later, Alderman Pfeiffer heard Riis tell this incident at a meeting and offered to square the account which Riis said his father owed (*New York Times*, May 13, 1904).

for the city, only to learn that the troops had left. For the twentieth or thirtieth time, it seemed, he knocked on the door of the French Consul, still hoping that other troops might be organized; but a violent argument followed, after which Riis and the Consul exchanged blows, and Riis was thrown out into the street.

Other efforts to enlist were futile. Once he ran all the way to the pier to take a job offered him as a stoker, only to see the boat sail away. At last he sat down and wept. It was the end. He now realized that as far as he was concerned, the war was over. He would not try again to go.

Weeks of tramping through the streets followed. Autumn had come. New York was full of the unemployed. A shivering crowd of hungry, homeless men shuffled into the corridors of the dingy police lodging-houses and asked for a night's shelter. They were ushered downstairs into dirty basements where rough planks were laid out up and down the length of the room in a kind of dismal dormitory for the outcasts who were huddled there. In these loathsome quarters, both men and women found a hard bed; thieves and pickpockets lay alongside honest men, in one indiscriminate mass. In the morning, after a fearful night, a man was apt to find his last treasure gone, snatched by the light fingers of his neighbor. That refuge was the last resort.

Riis found himself examining ash-bins in the hope of finding something he could eat, but they offered little. Too proud to beg, he pressed his nose against the frosty basement windows of Delmonico's, and a friendly cook, seeing the gaunt face, handed him some meat bones and rolls. At night he slept in doorways or drowsed away in some chill corner in Mulberry Bend or Five Points. A shove from a passing policeman and the inevitable "Get up," "Move on," came to be a regular part of the night.

His mind became obsessed by fantastic visions, in many of which the mirage of food played a part. What if he should die of starvation; what if . . . ? At this point he felt tempted to go with his letters of introduction and beg for help, but pride kept him from it, and one day he tore the notes into shreds for fear he might be tempted to use them.

Yet with all his miserable experiences, he had faith that sometime his luck would change. Over and over again there came to him the vision of the girl back home, and the locket with her hair in it still lay safe in his pocket.

Winter's chill had set in; no longer would the linen duster, clutched closely about his shivering frame, suffice against the cutting wind. He must either seek shelter or die of cold. He was no longer fit to apply for work. One look at his disheveled garments was enough to turn any would-be employer away.

One October morning an icy storm descended. All day the rain came down in sheets. At nightfall, Riis found himself down by the North River, drenched and cold. He looked into the great gulf of black before him. One moment would end his misery. A leap, water about his ears and eyes, a choking; then all would be blotted out forever.

As he brooded thus, a wet body rubbed against his leg, and a shivering little dog whimpered. It was the poor black and tan outcast that had once shared a doorway with him. He bent over and patted the dripping creature, and a friendly tongue licked him in return. Somehow, at this moment, the terrible pressure around Riis's heart relaxed; with his small friend beside him, he hurried away from that dark spot.

The police lodging-house loomed as a temporary solution. He entered the door of the station-house on Church Street. The lodging-rooms, foul and steaming, sheltered

a loud-mouthed crowd of tramps. He lay down and tried to sleep, but it was next to impossible. About midnight he reached up to make sure the beloved locket was there. It had disappeared. With angry tears, he complained to the sergeant, who called him a thief and a tramp and told the man at the door to put him out. On the stoop outside, the dog set up a growl for his new master; whereupon the police attendant snatched the little animal by the legs and beat its brains out against the stone steps. In blind rage, Riis seized paving stones and hurled them at the station-house, but his efforts brought him nothing. Two burly policemen came and escorted him forcibly to the nearest ferry and ordered him to get out of town by the first boat.

He had no money for fare and stood bewildered. Groping in his pocket he tried to find some means of exchange for a ticket. He came across a silk handkerchief, the very last of his treasures, and offered it to a sympathetic ferryman who accepted it in exchange for a ride. As Riis stood on a deck, he said he would never return to this cruel city.

The experience at the police lodging-house had as profound an effect upon Riis as any in his whole career. All the privations which he had previously experienced shrank to nothing beside his horror at a city system that would bunch men together like rats in a foul cellar and offer them no outlet for hope or betterment. He made up his mind that somehow, sometime, he would try to remedy conditions. In later years, when a successful writer and lecturer, he often repeated his story of his night's lodging and the cruel death of his dog, ending with the triumphant note—"My dog did not die unavenged."

Walking, earning his way by doing odd jobs, riding once in a cattle car, sleeping in barns, Riis reached Camden, New Jersey. Here he passed a night in a police cell, hav-

ing been picked up in a freight yard by a policeman. Next morning he crossed the Delaware and reached Philadelphia, where, miserable and discouraged, he decided to appeal to the Danish Consul, Ferdinand Myhlertz. Mr. and Mrs. Myhlertz helped him, and he laid aside his linen duster in favor of a warm suit. Two weeks of rest made him a new man. Then once more he was on his way, this time sent by the Consul to the home of a schoolmate in Jamestown, New York.

The next few months may be passed over as bringing a succession of odd jobs. He felled trees on Swede Hill, tried his hand at making cradles in a furniture shop at \$2.40 a dozen, cut ice on the lake, helped repair a steamer, hunted and trapped, hired out as a handyman, got work as a bedstead maker at a cabinet factory at Buffalo, worked with a railroad gang. The days passed in a casual hand-to-mouth existence until over a year had slipped by since he landed at the Battery.

During these months he had noticed many conditions of labor and of housing which he felt needed improvement. It occurred to him that by exposing the facts in print he might stir up the public to indignation and perhaps to reform, and so he made up his mind to be a newspaper reporter. Probably the carpentering had always been more or less expedient. Perhaps now he was being moved by his father's example as teacher and as writer for the Ribe newspaper.

He tried to get a job on a Buffalo newspaper, but was unsuccessful. Then he suddenly found himself plunging into an entirely new venture. It seems that some of the men who formed a small Danish colony at Jamestown, New York, decided to turn their felling of trees into a more profitable occupation, furniture making. Riis was at the time employed in plying a wheelbarrow back and

forth between the town and the wharf. When his acquaintances told him of their plan, he was enthusiastic. They would make the articles and he would take orders for them. He set forth in high hopes with his price list.

Everywhere he went, he astonished the prospective customers by his low prices, and his book piled up with orders. His employers, however, had miscalculated the expense of making the furniture, and it was not long before they frantically sent for Riis.

After this fiasco, he went to New York and became an agent for flat- and fluting-irons. This work took him all the way to Chicago and back. He was successful and was promoted to the position of general agent. But his personal success did not extend to his handling of the agents whom he appointed in the outlying provinces. When he returned over the territory, he found that his salesmen had defrauded him. In disgust, he went up the Allegheny River to get away from the world.

To add to his misfortunes, a letter from home brought the news that Elisabeth was to be married that summer to a young cavalry officer. This blow seemed almost too much to endure; thoroughly disheartened, he slowly made his way—for the most part on foot—back to New York, still peddling irons.

Indications of physical exhaustion were now apparent. Months of exposure had told on him, The heavy work of wielding an ax had caused his heart to palpitate frequently, and recent fevers and utter discouragement had sapped his energy.

In New York he decided to become a telegraph operator, and he spent his last twenty dollars for the course at a Fourth Avenue business college. Every morning he sold irons, and in the afternoons he attended classes. One day his first chance at newspaper work came. He read in the

advertisements of a job as city editor of a Long Island paper; the position would pay the magnificent sum of eight dollars a week. He went hurrying out, applied for the job, and was hired. But the work only lasted a few weeks, for the Editor-in-Chief failed to pay him any wages.

Back to the city he went. This time he became an agent for an illustrated set of Dickens issued by Harpers. As it happened, he canvassed with a copy of *Hard Times*, which proved to be unpopular. Prospective customers gave one look at the gloomy title of the work and closed the door in the agent's face.

It was now 1873, that black year of the panic.⁵ Unstable financial conditions in general, overexpansion in some industries, inflation, were partly responsible, and the failure of Jay Cooke precipitated a nation-wide crisis. Business was paralyzed, and the number of unemployed increased by leaps and bounds.

Jacob Riis wanted a newspaper job, but he was ready to take anything honest that was offered him. One day as he sat, disconsolate and hungry, in the doorway of Cooper Union, the principal of the telegraph school approached him and told him of a ten-dollar-a-week job open at the New York News Association. Needless to say, Riis was delighted. He started immediately toward the address given. As he passed Grace Church, he stood for a moment and prayed for strength to carry him in his new work.

The editors agreed to take him on probation; but he must first cover a story. This momentous assignment was a luncheon meeting the next day at the Astor House. He arrived promptly and prepared to take notes. Almost famished, he smelled the tempting foods, but asked for noth-

⁵ A. M. Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-287; A. Nevins, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-299.

ing. Perhaps his desperation that day inspired him; at any rate, his story of the meeting won him the job.

Riis's assignments included numerous meetings from Harlem to the Bowery. His working day often extended from ten o'clock one morning to one or two of the following morning. In winter he took long rides in the cars, stamping his cold feet against the straw-covered floor. Later on, in writing of this experience, he said his work was remarkable for quantity rather than quality. Doubtless, however, the tremendous zest that he put into the work and his extensive experience gave him even at this time something of the facility and vigor of style which characterize his later writings. Regular pay made him feel prosperous, he began to save, and before many months had passed he had a grand total of seventy-five dollars. As he dryly pointed out, his hours were so long that he hadn't time to spend any money.

On May 20, 1874, he accepted a newspaper job in Brooklyn. Some politicians hired him as a reporter and afterwards as editor of their *South Brooklyn News*, a paper that they intended to use as an organ for winning votes in the next election.

Six months of hard work followed. Riis found himself opposed to the ideas of his employers; they in turn found him none too pliable as an editor. After their success in the fall election, they were ready to sell out, and late in December, 1874, Riis purchased the *News*, paying his seventy-five-dollars' savings down, and signing notes for the remainder—\$650. By June 5, 1875, he owned the paper free of debt.

After he had bought the paper, Riis was offered a job as court interpreter at one hundred dollars a month. He accepted the position, the only political appointment of his career. But the implications of graft in the holding of

an office for which there seemed little need soon made the job distasteful to him, and after three months he resigned.

His was a one-man newspaper. He had to compose every line of its four pages. In addition, he had to canvass for advertisements and, when the completed edition was issued from a Manhattan press, he had to carry the bundles across the river to his office in South Brooklyn. There he slept on a counter to be ready for the newsboys at dawn.

One night he attended a Methodist revival meeting, conducted by the Rev. Ichabod H. Simmons. Riis was greatly moved by the service and went to the altar, converted. Straightway he wanted to give up his job and become a preacher, but the Reverend Mr. Simmons urged him to continue his writing, pointing out that he could exercise a wide influence in journalism. Years afterward Riis said his experience that night made him determine to consecrate his pen to the work of human betterment.

CHAPTER III

Jacob Riis, Newspaper Man; Marriage

I

DURING those busy days of his first newspaper work, he seems to have kept in touch with his family in Denmark. On Christmas Eve, 1874, he received a letter from home telling him the sad news of the death of Sofus, his older brother. The same letter brought him the news that Elisabeth's fiancé, Lieutenant B—, had died, and that she was living among strangers.

Once again he began to plan.¹ Perhaps she might, in time, be willing to come to America. Acting on this hope, he sat down one day and wrote the important letter. Would she accept him?

Months slipped by. Then one day came the answer from the girl. Word followed half-hesitant word on the paper, but she wrote the message which he was waiting to hear. Almost crazy with joy, he went about like a man in a dream, arranging his affairs, and getting ready to go to Denmark. He must let no time go by, lest—! In a few weeks he sold his paper for more than three thousand dollars, and was soon on his way.

Here some space should be devoted to the young woman whose life was to be a part of his for thirty years.² She is the beloved wife in the tenderest passages of *The Mak-*

¹ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901), pp. 148-150.

² Genealogical information in R. W. Riis collection.

ing of an American. Elisabeth's ancestors were a substantial and self-sustaining group. Her grandfather, Johan Christian Titus Von Beissenhertz, was the son of a merchant. He joined the army and became a second lieutenant and was decorated as a Knight of Dannebrog and with other medals. He married Anne Elisabeth Smith, a member of a numerous and esteemed bourgeois family in Frederickssund, a little town on the east side of Roskilde Fjord. Lieutenant Beissenhertz was allowed to add "Von" to his name because of his rank as royal officer and his wife used the "Frue" title. Later on, this couple moved to a small country estate containing a water-mill. One of their children became manager of the Barony Lovenberg near Holbak, Sjælland. Another became Major-General and Chamberlain to the King. A third married a pharmacist, and still another became a postmaster. One of their daughters, Elisabeth Titussine Beissenhertz married a young attorney, Mr. Nielsen, of Herning and became the mother of three children, one of whom was the Elisabeth of our story. Young Nielsen died after a few years, and the widow made a desperate effort to support her children. Finding this impossible, however, she sent little Elisabeth to Ribe to live with her sister, Mrs. Clara Francisca Beissenhertz Gjortz. Later on, the child was adopted by Mrs. Gjortz and her husband, the manufacturer, who also brought the other two children to live with them after Mrs. Nielsen's death.

The Gjortzes lived in a pretentious home surrounded by luxuries and attended by servants. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Herr Gjortz hoped that his foster-daughter would marry well. Sometime after Jacob Riis's departure for New York, Elisabeth met a young lieutenant with whom she fell desperately in love. He was some years older than she. Their romance was to have culminated in

marriage; but, suddenly and tragically, he contracted tuberculosis. Elisabeth defied her parents' wishes and went to stay with his family, near the sanatorium. At his death, she was left alone, heartbroken.

When Jacob Riis's letter reached her, she was a governess in a baron's household some distance away from Ribe.³ Her feelings were mixed. All of her dreams had vanished with the death of her fiancé. She was lonely. As she read Jacob's letter, she remembered that he had been loyal to her for years. He would, no doubt, be a devoted husband. He had useful work in a new land where there was hope. Why not cast in her lot with his and begin a new life? Her first impulse to refuse him changed into a resolve to say yes, and so at last, she had sat down to write the letter.

During the Christmas holidays, 1875, he reached Ribe. He had met his father by chance on the train; and he saw that the latter was an old man now. At the depot two of the other boys joined them, and they went quickly toward home.

After the happy evening meal, he left to go to the Gjortz home. When he reached there, an old servant opened the door and showed him in. The family was having a card party in the parlor; and he found himself in the room, facing the Gjortzes. Presently, Elisabeth stood near him. Her foster-parents, still opposing the marriage, asked the girl to choose. A solemn moment passed, and then, without a word, she crossed the floor and placed her hand in his.

They were to be married on March 5, 1876, and at last the happy day arrived. Loving friends crowded into the old Domkirke. Humble folk, beneficiaries of her foster-

³ J. A. Riis, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-166.

parents' bounty, lined the path outside with flowers from their window gardens. Wrinkled old faces smiled with joy. Inside the church, Jacob Riis and his young bride knelt before the altar; ⁴ a shaft of light glanced down upon them as they uttered the words that made them man and wife.

2

Almost immediately they were on their way to America. Riis was fairly bursting with new ambition and fresh plans. Both were thinking of the small home they were going to set up in Brooklyn.

It was early summer, 1876, when their boat pulled up at the dock. That was the year when President Grant was just rounding out his eight years in office, the year of the Hayes-Tilden campaign. America was entering the fourth year of depression since the panic of 1873. It was the year, too, of the great centennial exposition at Philadelphia where new modes in furniture and art, as well as such inventions as the pneumatic tube for carrying parcels and the typewriter were shown to a gaping public.⁵

The national picture was, however, not quite as absorbing to the newlyweds as was their experience of setting up housekeeping in their South Brooklyn rooms.⁶ Elisabeth was trying very hard to adjust herself to the strange, new environment, and Jacob hurried home joyfully to help her with the chores.

Their first Christmas together, so far away from Denmark, threatened to be sad; but he caught the wistful look in her eye and was particularly cheerful. He brought home a present that ever after hung over her bed. It was a copy

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵ A. Nevins, *The Emergence of Modern America* (New York, 1932), p. 310.

⁶ J. A. Riis, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-199; J. A. Riis, "A Dream, or What?", *The Century*, LXIV (Oct., 1902), 872-873.

of the beautiful Good Shepherd protecting his lambs.⁷ Something about the exquisite tenderness of the picture reminded Riis of his wife, and from that day he called her "Lammet."

At first young Mrs. Riis had great difficulty with the cooking. One day she burned the chicken to a crisp, and Jacob found her with flaming cheeks, mortified over her failure. But he did not mind; their meal of bread and cheese that night seemed as good as any feast. They retained a distinctly Danish atmosphere in their home, although both knew English and used that language more and more as the years went on. A number of Danes lived in the same neighborhood and the Riises always extended a welcome.

Their first baby, a boy, was born in 1877. They named him George Edward Valdemar, the Edward for Mr. Riis's father, and Valdemar in recognition of the noble line of Danish kings, whom the young parents so much admired. A second baby, this time a little girl, was born in 1880; they named her Clara for Mrs. Riis's sister. John, the third child, was born in 1882.⁸

Beginning with that first year, the family celebrated with great festivities. Jacob loved the fun and good cheer and the singing of the good old Yuletide hymns. In later years his daughter, Clara, wrote: ⁹

The very earliest recollections I have of my Father are from the Christmas holidays when we lived in Brooklyn. Father was always very boyish and joyful and much interested in all that went on towards making the Christmas Holiday a real time of merry-making festivity. I can remember that he organized a Christmas Parade through the house. Mother playing on a fine

⁷ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. R. W. Gilder, May 20, 1905 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

⁸ Information supplied by Mr. R. W. Riis.

⁹ Letter from Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske, Oct. 5, 1933.

tooth comb! Father beating on a pan with a kitchen spoon and the children, three of us following after as best we could with penny whistles and Ed had a little drum—even the family cat, which I think was black, had a gorgeous bow on his tail and a paper collar of many points around his neck. Around and around we went until we collapsed with laughter.

After his return to America, Riis immediately set about job-hunting.¹⁰ His little pile of savings dwindled fast. The furniture had to be paid for, and there were many additional expenses. He went to work for the South Brooklyn politicians once more, but soon left them on finding that his views were utterly opposed to theirs. He wanted to get another newspaper job, but there was no opening. He was near desperation. Finally he decided to buy a stereopticon outfit. With this he turned to and displayed advertisements for Brooklyn merchants. His work consisted of stretching a sheet from a rope between two trees and flashing on the canvas a series of advertisements. He was fairly successful, and drew crowds wherever he went. That first winter he conducted a window display at Myrtle and Fulton Streets; he alternated the display with some attractive pictures of his own. This work caused some dismay among relatives in Denmark who shook their heads over the "street fakir."¹¹

Riis now entered a kind of partnership with a druggist, Ed Wells; and they prepared to go into advertising on a larger scale.¹² They planned to publish a city directory of the town of Elmira. Why they chose this town is not clear, but they decided to take a lantern outfit and radiate into the vicinity in a campaign for subscriptions. Inauspiciously, they began their tour in the summer of 1877.

¹⁰ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 178-186.

¹¹ J. A. Riis, *ibid.*, p. 184. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

That was the time of the historic railroad strike caused by a general wage reduction of 10 per cent on the Pennsylvania, New York Central, and Baltimore & Ohio railways. Between July 16 and 31, 1877, there was rioting,¹³ destruction of property, and loss of life at Martinsburg, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, and other places; and as a result President Hayes, at the request of the governors of the states involved, sent troops to help in quieting the disorder. Reaction from this series of disturbances spread to other states; there was a general distrust of any strangers who came into a community, as it was thought they might be labor agitators.¹⁴ When Riis and Wells began their work in the districts surrounding Elmira, the strike scenes were still fresh in the public mind, and on the day when the two salesmen tried to assemble their first crowd, they found their journey blocked by suspicious citizens and their business venture at an end. There was nothing to do but pack up and go back to Brooklyn.

At last his chance came to get a job on a New York city newspaper. Mr. Shanks, Riis's neighbor in Brooklyn and a member of *The Tribune* staff, told him of an opening on that paper. Riis hastened to apply, and in the fall of 1877¹⁵ began his duties as reporter. Although the pay was small, it was enough to enable him to meet his expenses, and he thoroughly liked the work.

All through that winter of 1877-78, he covered assignments from one end of the city to the other. Once he was sent to cover a big fire at Coney Island.¹⁶ The weather was extremely bitter and on arriving at Sheepshead Bay, he found himself blocked by ice from proceeding. That was long before the day of the subway and elevated connec-

¹³ A. Nevins, *op. cit.*, pp. 386-392.

¹⁴ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 186-187.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

tions to Coney, and he had to stand around hoping for some news to come in. Unfortunately, he took some accounts of bystanders as true, so that his story was a bit fantastic when later details came out; yet the incident showed his zeal in trying to make good. His hours were painfully long and the pay he drew amounted to less than twenty-five dollars a week. After some time he felt discouraged, for he was barely making enough to support his growing family. It began to look as though he would have to leave newspaper work and get something else to do.

One day he was rushing back to the office hoping to make the edition with a story.¹⁷ Upon rounding a windy corner, he ran into a man and knocked him down. Fumbling to adjust his spectacles and help his disgruntled victim, he discovered to his chagrin that it was the city editor of his paper. Stammering, he offered an apology and explained why he was rushing. His irate chief glared hard and asked him if he always hurried like that.

The next morning Riis was summoned to the inner office. He fully expected to lose his job, and his fears were almost confirmed when Mr. Shanks said stiffly, "Mr. Riis, you knocked me down last night without cause—into a snowdrift—nice thing for a reporter to do to his commanding officer."¹⁸ So his career was about to end, he thought dejectedly, as Mr. Shanks continued, "Now, sir, this will not do. We must find some way of preventing it in the future. Our man at Police Headquarters has left. I am going to send you up there in his place. You can run there all you want to and you will want to all you can..."¹⁹ For some moments after his chief spoke, Riis stood bewildered. He, "Jake" Riis, a police reporter! Then he

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 196. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

realized that it was actually true, and with a leap he hurried off to send Mrs. Riis a telegram: "Got staff appointment. Police Headquarters \$25 a week. Hurrah!" And so it was that he began his life-work, which centered around the little office at 301 Mulberry Street.²⁰

Several newspapers jointly used the small building as a branch location for their police reporters. Riis's fellow writers had the reputation of being hard, and this assignment was reputedly the toughest in the city. Yet it was a challenge. The other men were not eager to have this particular representative of the *Tribune* and the Associated Press come into their territory.²¹ He seemed too energetic to suit their plans. They had had for some time an arrangement by which they collected the news bulletins from Police Headquarters and distributed them among the group; each reporter would go out on one or two assignments—when they all returned, they exchanged the news and wrote their stories, and were through to play poker or otherwise entertain themselves for the remainder of the day. They made fun of the "Dutchman,"²² and organized themselves for a monster effort to get ahead of him. As a result, the new-comer was so beaten in the police, health, and fire departments that after a few days the Associated Press manager told the *Tribune* editor that he did not think Riis would do. Nevertheless, Mr. Shanks had faith; and in another week it was the "Dutchman's" turn. Against the twelve others he made two or three "beats," and they had to tolerate him from then on.

His work as a reporter was not confined to the East Side; but that district furnished him with much of his material. Mulberry Street led on past his office toward the Bowery, and it became more congested with every

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

²² *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-233.

block. Tenements, five and six stories high, lined the narrow thoroughfare. Cross-streets, too, and alleyways with equally tall buildings, led off from this dismal long row. Behind many tenements which faced on the street there were rear buildings, with no exits save through the narrow hallway of the front house. Fire, breaking out in one of these back dwellings, often trapped the inhabitants like rats. Filthy, airless shafts sent up a stench as a curse toward the gray sky.

To Jacob Riis, Mulberry Street and its environs represented a veritable mine for stories. In the drab interior of a hall bedroom, he might stumble on the crumpled body of an impoverished nobleman; in the half light of a miserable room he might find a deserted young mother feebly nursing her dying child. On the stairs he might see a foundling, barely distinguishable in the dark. Flames leaping from a five-story tenement-house might yield him a tale of heroic sacrifice. But the story in itself was not the only end in view; the tragic environment inspired him with the hope that some day he could help put an end to these miserable conditions.

With an odd style of injecting editorial comments into his stories, Riis gave each account something of his own personality. He seemed to have a faculty for taking a few random facts and combining them into a story that breathed the warmth of human joy and suffering. His lively imagination could play up the most commonplace happening without sacrifice of truth. The fact that he was genuinely interested in people helped; their sorrows were to him as real and gripping as any personal misfortune.

The excitement of it fascinated him. His work was exacting and his hours were often so long that they must have seemed ruinous to an ordinary constitution; but to

Riis, it was an adventure and an opportunity that he would not have exchanged for the high office of editor.

In many of his stories there were frequent digressions, which gave at first the impression that the writer was merely rambling; but as one read on one found that this was really a skilful method of enlisting the reader's sympathy for some unfortunate waif. The chief characteristics of Riis's writing were a realism that cut to the heart of many a hardened cynic and a romanticism which never failed to cast its spell over the drab story. There was, too, a fatalism that showed itself here and there in his plaintive tales of suicides and Potter's Field burials. Whatever the approach might be, there was invariably a note of sympathy for the misguided or underprivileged human being who had suddenly become "news."

His friends, trying to prod him loose from his reporter's beat, wanted him to develop his material into fiction; but he was not interested in playing up a story beyond its true implications. The real article was what interested him, he said. Furthermore, he did not believe he could invent plots.

Dr. Roger S. Tracy, then Sanitary Inspector in the Health Department,²³ who was to become Riis's great friend in later years, told of the occasion on which he first became conscious of the presence of this young reporter.²⁴ Smallpox had broken out in the city, and the Board of Health was investigating. At that time the Department was located behind Police Headquarters and Riis made it a practice to drop by and scout for news. On the day when the smallpox scare struck the town, he entered the Health Office and began to ask questions of a doctor on duty. When Dr. Tracy came in, he found a bespectacled

²³ Dr. Tracy was later Statistician.

²⁴ Letter from Dr. Tracy to Mrs. Riis (R. W. Riis collection).

young man persistently asking for facts about bacteria. Reluctant officials were giving him the details.

At the time when Riis came to Mulberry Street, New York was still shuddering from some of the most daring criminal acts that had taken place in her history up to that time. The disappearance of Charley Ross—the most famous kidnapping of the nineteenth century—had occurred only a few months before. The big hold-up and robbery of the Manufacturers Bank was still the talk of the town.²⁵ In the Mulberry Street section, the famous Whyo Gang had its headquarters. Murderer's Alley, Gotham Court, and Bottle Alley harbored thieves and lawless individuals of every kind. Timid persons felt chills creep up and down their spines.

Riis soon formed a philosophy about his relation to the underworld. He found that if a man went through these districts attending to his own business, he was left unmolested. On the whole, he rarely ran into direct personal danger, and he learned to take life as he found it. Every house in that network of ugly streets running off Mulberry became as familiar as home to him.

Sometimes he was mistaken for a doctor. On one occasion a gang was engaging in a fight. Riis found himself inside a stuffy room where one man lay stabbed and bleeding to death, while the others engaged in a free-for-all fight. When the other men saw Riis, they took him for an "ambulance chaser," and ordered him to attend to the wounded man. Fortunately, a policeman came shortly afterward and Riis was saved from serious trouble.²⁶

There was humor mixed with pathos in many of the stories which he covered.²⁷ In a later work he told of going

²⁵ One of his early assignments was to cover a phase of this great theft.

²⁶ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 200-233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

one day to learn the facts about the drowning of a young actor. The three sisters of the young man, in their first outburst of grief, were weeping as Riis entered their Eighth Avenue home. It was a very hot day in midsummer, and Riis had put a cabbage leaf in his hat to ward off sunstroke. He had forgotten about it and the leaf had settled down on his head like a skullcap. Totally unaware of his appearance, he approached the sisters, hat in hand. What was his astonishment to see them stare at him and then burst into wild laughter. For a moment he thought they had gone mad; then, on raising his hand to rub his puzzled head, he discovered the cause of their amusement. For years afterward, whenever he thought of that day, he was convulsed.

One of the most important stories which Riis covered in the middle 1880's was that of the Drexel Committee investigation. A special group was appointed by the legislature in 1884²⁸ to make an inquiry into New York City housing conditions. Dr. Felix Adler, the chairman, and his colleagues undertook to make a thorough study of the tenements. They found ramshackle fire-trap dwellings rented by unscrupulous landlords to the thousands of poor tenants who had nowhere else to go. The law of 1867 regulating to some extent the light and air and sanitary arrangements in the buildings was not being observed. At the end of the investigation the committee made a comprehensive report, one of the results of which was the passage of the Small Parks Act of 1887. Riis was particularly interested in the incisive questions which Adler put to the landlords and said afterward that he had thereby learned much in the way of technique.

²⁸ W. H. Tolman, "Half a Century of Improved Housing Effort," *Yale Review* (Feb. 1897), pp. 389-395; J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 246-248.

All attempts at reform in the 1880's and early 1890's were badly hampered by conditions in city politics. Although the Drexel Committee report called for changes in housing conditions, little was actually done. Only too often corrupt officials, receiving graft from the landlords, allowed condemned buildings to stand. The brief period of reform under Mayor Hewitt (1887-88) ended with the return of Tammany in 1890, and from that time until the famous Lexow investigation of 1894 the Tiger was in control. The Police Department became notoriously low in its standards. Many of the officers winked at the evils of the slums because their chiefs had pecuniary interests there; they accepted fees from disorderly houses and failed to report violations of the law.

Complicating the difficulty in bringing about reform was the fact that during the eighties and nineties thousands of immigrants from both Northern and Southern Europe were flocking into the United States and crowding the already full living quarters. Workmen were often content to huddle with their families in dingy rooms doing sweat-shop labor, if only they could make a living and have hopes for the future. Many of them gave no encouragement to movements for reform in housing; either they had low living standards or they feared the rent would be higher if they were forced to move to better homes. Moreover, the ignorant foreigner was often the easy prey of the politician who came around with crisp new dollar bills to buy a vote.

It did not take Riis very long to sense the political and social implications in the struggle for improved housing conditions. He realized that, if sweeping changes were to be brought about, the reform forces of the city would have to work hard and make a fight against indifference and graft. He must help in that fight with all his strength.

Some idea of the nature of his articles in those earlier years, 1883 to 1887, can be gained from a list of some of the clippings that he pasted in his scrap-book. The human-interest appeal is evident in the titles:

Morning Journal

April 15, 1883	1400 Years in Jail
April 23, 1883	The Rogues' Gallery
April 26, 1883	The City's Virus Farm
April 29, 1883	The Oldest Finest
May 14, 1883	Whiffs of Spring
April 4, 1883	Removing the Dead
April 13, 1883	Police Properties
April 14, 1883	Epidemic Dangers

The Tribune

Aug. 12, 1883	How the Days Pass at Shelter Island
April 6, 1884	North Atlantic Cable
May 24, 1885	King Christian's Troubles

The World

May 25, 1883	Secrets of the River
June 11, 1883	Pestilence Nurseries
June 18, 1883	Searching Prisoners
June 24, 1883	Cute Tricks of Thieves
June 25, 1883	The Tramps Marching
July 2, 1883	The Old Shore Road
July 8, 1883	Accomplished Beggars
July 15, 1883	{ Missing in a Large City Does a Thief's Trade Pay

The Mercury

Aug. 26, 1883	Men with Pistols
Dec. 30, 1883	Ominous Signals
Mar. 23, 1884	Police Conundrums
April 6, 1884	Red Tape Extravagance
Dec. 14, 1884	An Official Farce
June 7, 1885	Born For a Fireman
June 14, 1885	He Never Returned
June 21, 1885	Puts His Foot Down
Aug. 23, 1885	This Year's Baby Crop

South Brooklyn News (weekly)

Christmas 1884 Lost on the Heath

The Graphic

August, 1884 A Dog With a History

The Standard (Henry George's paper)

Feb. 5, 1887 Municipal Freshness

Mail and Express

June 21, 1884 A Sunday Morning Market

June 25, 1884 What It Costs to Keep Rats

July 16, 1884 The New York Pickpocket

Aug. 27, 1884 Violating City Laws

Sept. 11, 1884 Found in the Streets

Mar. 14, 1885 Horses Stray Away

Evening Sun

May 16, 1885 A Church with a New Idea

May 17, 1885 Money Made at the Dumps

May 24, 1885 Kings and Queens Too Risky

Nov. 19, 1885 "The Old Controversy as to Whether or Not, etc."

Since the old street-advertising days he had believed in the power of the picture to enforce his points. The public must see for itself; there was no denying the truth of the photograph, whereas the readers might be skeptical about some of his pen sketches. Hence he found his camera a useful tool. One day in the early eighties when he was reading his newspaper at breakfast in his Brooklyn home, he came across the item that a flash-light powder had been discovered in Germany. This was wonderful news—he could now snap pictures of dwellings that heretofore had been too dark. He could hardly wait to get to the Health Department to enlist the support of Dr. John T. Nagle, a friend who was especially interested in photography. Within two weeks Riis and his friend, accompanied by Dr. Henry G. Pifford and Richard Hoe Lawrence, enthu-

siastic amateurs, were making trips through the East Side by night catching with their camera plates the almost unspeakably foul conditions which they found.²⁹ Sometimes the small explosion of the powder brought terror to the occupants of crowded cellars and rear rooms, and they bolted through the nearest window or scurried away like scared rats.

Soon the night trips wearied Riis's companions and he was left to take his pictures alone. This was inconvenient, and he hired a professional photographer; but to his dismay he learned that the latter was selling photographs behind his back. A second photographer proved too expensive—and at last Riis made up his mind to buy a new camera outfit and take his own pictures.

One day in January he went alone to Potter's Field, located on a city island; there he wanted to take a picture of the trench opened to receive the pauper coffins. In that dreary waste place, with sunlight glancing across the snow, he exposed his plates; then, shivering, he returned to the city to develop the negatives. The results were disappointing; of twelve exposures, one plate alone turned out the sad story of the pauper grave. That one, however, darkened as it was in the development process, proved gloomily effective in the following years when he presented it on the magic-lantern screen to astonished audiences.

Of the many other scenes which he photographed one of the most graphic and most productive of results came from a crowded lodgers' den.³⁰ Two rooms which should have contained at most five sleepers held, by actual count, fifteen, a week-old baby being the youngest of the lot. Five cents a spot for each lodger was the charge exacted

²⁹ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 268-275.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

in this hovel. On the day after he took this scene, Riis presented the photographs still wet to the Health Board for their consideration. Astonished grunts and exclamations of surprise showed him that he had made the intended impression.

CHAPTER IV

Riis and the Reform Movement, 1886-1897

BY 1886, Riis was a seasoned reporter. During the preceding ten years he had covered every type of case from crime to death. But in spite of the routine of turning out page after page of copy, year in and year out, he retained the enthusiasm of his cub days. Every story seemed to have its special twist, now weird, now grim, now triumphant in its lesson of human sacrifice. Riis was an odd mixture of the matter-of-fact, the worldly wise, and the romantic. He gave the bare facts of an incident without any attempt to soften or embellish them; but, after recounting them just as they had happened, he would add some compassionate phrase that lifted the reader beyond the world of Mulberry Street to the realm of things of the spirit. He had, in short, become an artist in human-interest appeal.

The years 1886-97 were the period of Riis's greatest activity. In addition to his newspaper work he wrote numerous magazine articles and published three books, one of which, *How the Other Half Lives*, was a pioneer in works of its kind in the United States.¹ He battled against the police-station lodging-houses, urged the razing of Mulberry Bend and the establishment of a park in its place, advocated better schools, pleaded for more adequate working conditions for the laboring man, bespoke further

¹ Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes* (1873) carried similar material but was not as comprehensive a work.

legislation to restrict immigration, and urged wider control of the liquor traffic. In his lectures he showed the astonished public what life in the tenements was like.

To evaluate his work as we encounter it during this period, it is necessary to turn to the general picture of the time.² Everybody is familiar with the great growth of industrialism in the country after the Civil War. By 1886, it had become one of the most potent factors in American life. Factory towns had sprung up like mushrooms all over the country and thousands of laborers were flocking into them from the rural districts. The overcrowding in city slums, which had been noticeable as early as the 1860's, had now reached dangerous proportions. European immigration had increased with each decade; there were as yet no restrictions beyond a head tax imposed by the Federal Government and the Contract Labor Law of 1885, which forbade would-be employers to import cheap labor on promises of work. The immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe had begun, and every ship brought its crowd of men, women, and children with their bundles and shawls. Two or three families were often herded into quarters designed for one and the tenants often took in lodgers to eke out their rent. Each slum district came to have its own racial aspect; Italians congregated in one region, Bohemians in another, Russian Jews in another, the Irish in another, and so forth. Unscrupulous manufacturers encouraged sweat-shop labor, indifferent to the sight of fathers and mothers bending over garments in dark, unsanitary rooms. Although some housing legislation had already been effected, the laws in most cities were poorly enforced; only too often corrupt politicians de-

² A. M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City* (New York, 1933); H. U. Faulkner, *The Quest for Social Justice* (New York, 1931); V. L. Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1930), Vol. III, pp. 301-334.

fended the landlords when cases of violation of law were brought into court.

The growth of industrialism, the increase of immigration, and the persistence of overcrowding had brought many problems in their wake. In the late eighties and the nineties the number of poverty-stricken persons in the United States was becoming larger, and the country was faced with the prospect of having a permanent pauper class.³ Bad environment in the crowded tenements had brought an increase of crime and juvenile delinquency, and the country had not yet made adequate provision for either the adult or the juvenile offender. There was, moreover, a decline in the old spirit of neighborliness which had characterized the simple communities existing before the machine age; bonds of sympathy were harder to form.

Numerous groups in the United States were offering solutions for the serious social problems that had arisen. The doctrine of laissez-faire was rapidly losing the prestige it had enjoyed. Political theorists offered panaceas, among them a changed society in which there should be a wider distribution of wealth and greater benefits for the laboring man. The Socialists presented their plea for public ownership of the means of production, and a redistribution of wealth. Henry George advanced his economic theory of the single tax. Municipal reform clubs spent time and energy in trying to remove corruption from city government and to bring about social legislation. Not least among the theorists were the Utopians who dreamed of a society where all would work and all would share the benefits of

³ A. J. Warner, S. A. Queen, and E. B. Harper, *American Charities and Social Work* (New York, 1930), pp. 25-141; R. Hunter, *Poverty* (New York, 1904); F. D. Watson, *The Charity Organization Movement in the United States* (New York, 1922); Mrs. C. R. Lowell, "The Economic and Moral Effects of Public Outdoor Relief," *National Conference of Social Work Proceedings*, Vol. XVII (1890), pp. 81-91.

labor. This group had a wide following. One of their number, Edward Bellamy, wrote *Looking Backward from the Year 2000 to 1887* (published in 1888), and William Dean Howells advanced a similar thesis in his *A Traveller from Altruria* (published in 1894).

It was during this period, too, that the American Federation of Labor was founded (1886) with a view to procuring better conditions of labor for the working-man. This organization added its voice to the clamor for legislative reforms.

That the movement for reform should reach into the field of literature was inevitable.⁴ Reference has already been made to the Utopian writers, but the movement extended beyond their works. While the romantic school had long tinged American letters with a rosy glow, beginnings of realism were distinctly visible in the works of this period. Magazines carried stories of Bowery life and slum conditions. Books such as *A Hazard of New Fortunes* by William Dean Howells, told of society in the new industrial age. By the middle nineties several realistic works came off the press. Stephen Crane drew a sordid picture of slum life in his *Maggie, A Child of the Streets* (1894); Frank Norris gave his readers the drab *McTeague*, and Hamlin Garland began to publish his harsh sketches of the Mid-West in *Main Travelled Roads* (1894). Many writers were so depressed by what they saw that their works were filled with gloom. This was not the case with Riis, however, though he was a member of the new realistic school. He retained a cheerful optimism that is hard to understand.

A glance at the social work of the country shows that a great deal of effort was being made to relieve distress among the poor. There were a few national organizations

⁴ V. L. Parrington, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-334.

such as the American Red Cross, The National Conference of Charities and Corrections, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which aimed at meeting different aspects of the social problems; but, in the main, work tended to be more local than national in scope. There was, as yet, no school of social work where men and women might be trained, and only too often the social workers were merely supplying relief. Yet they often had a friendly spirit which established a bond of sympathy between them and the needy persons under their care, so that much good work resulted. There was a distinct tendency toward group activity in social-work programs and it was during this period that the settlements were first founded in the United States,⁵ with their ideal of maintaining neighborhood spirit through joint participation in club work and community activities. The movement for parks and playgrounds gained momentum in this period.⁶ Boston led the way with "Sand Gardens" patterned after the German playgrounds, and other cities followed suit. During this decade many churches, realizing the need to extend their work, formed clubs in congested neighborhoods and broadened their activities in behalf of the poor.

No brief account of the New York social work of this period (1886-96) can give an adequate idea of the spirit of the workers, their enthusiasm and earnestness. Life to the ardent New York social workers was a tremendously zestful social experience. They felt that they must somehow meet the material needs of the poor and at the same time "help them to help themselves." By the late eighties

⁵ R. A. Woods and A. J. Kennedy, *The Settlement Horizon* (New York, 1922), pp. 62, 114, 223-242.

⁶ C. E. Rainwater, *The Play Movement in the United States* (Chicago, 1922), pp. 45-135; J. Lee, *Constructive and Preventive Philanthropy* (New York, 1902); H. S. Curtis, *The Play Movement and Its Significance* (New York, 1917), pp. 15-18.

and nineties the number of agencies, both public and private, was large. It would take many pages merely to list these organizations. The Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, the Charity Organization Society, the United Hebrew Charities, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the State Charities Aid, the Travelers Aid, the Salvation Army, the Children's Aid Society, and the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children were among the familiar names. New Agencies, too, were founded.

In the movement to establish settlements in the United States, New York led the way.⁷ Stanton Coit, an Amherst graduate, had lived at Toynbee Hall in London, and in August, 1886, he went to live in the New York slums. In the next year he founded Neighborhood Guild (later University Settlement) on the East Side. Charles B. Stover came to help him and was one of the leaders in the movement for playgrounds. In 1889 the College Settlement opened its doors with Miss Jean E. Fine and Dr. Jane E. Robbins as workers, and in 1890 King's Daughters' Settlement was organized. Among the other New York settlements founded in this decade were the Henry Street Nursing Association (founded 1893) with Miss Lillian D. Wald as head, and Hudson Guild (1895) under the leadership of Dr. John L. Elliott. All of these settlements conducted club work and took an active stand in agitating for social reforms, including regulation of sweat-shops and housing conditions.

Two of the well-known organizations with which Mr. Riis had constant contact were the Charity Organization Society⁸ and the Children's Aid Society. The Charity Or-

⁷ R. A. Woods, A. J. Kennedy (Eds.), *Handbook of Settlements* (New York, 1911), pp. 193-194, 205-207, 228-229.

⁸ F. D. Watson, *op. cit.*, Annual Reports of the New York Charity Organization Society: 1889, 1890, 1892-1897; Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, 1886-1892.

ganization Society was founded in 1882 with Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell,⁹ a woman of Boston ancestry and sister-in-law of George William Curtis of the Civil Service Reform League, as one of the moving spirits. Charles D. Kellogg was the secretary of the society in the eighties and early nineties. There was a staff of visitors, or agents, whose work was allocated to districts, and there were district committees and volunteers. The main steps in the work of the district staff consisted in registration of the case in a central bureau, and investigation of the fitness of the applicant by visits to relatives, employers, and others. The visitors procured jobs for their clients, gave relief, secured loans, and attempted to sustain and develop character.¹⁰ The modern emphasis on individual treatment through the use of psychiatric techniques was yet distant, however. Often the agents stumbled upon a plan by which they could help the troubled client to resolve his difficulties, but the day of mental hygiene and the knowledge of emotional conflicts had not come. The society urged coöperation among the social agencies in order to reduce overlapping of effort. Its executives were active in agitating for housing and other legislative reforms.

The Children's Aid Society was doing a notable work. The Reverend Charles Loring Brace had founded¹¹ this organization in 1853. Under his genial and kindly leadership the work of the society had expanded until, in the early nineties, it conducted industrial classes, maintained a farm for boys in Westchester County, and placed out and supervised children on farms in the West.

⁹ W. R. Stewart, *The Philanthropic Work of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (New York, 1911).

¹⁰ C. D. Kellogg, *History of the Charity Organization in the United States* (Chicago, 1893); *Annual Reports of the New York Charity Organization Society*, 1886-1896.

¹¹ E. Brace (Ed.), *Life and Letters of Charles Loring Brace* (New York, 1894), pp. 426-503.

A number of individuals gave their services freely either in individual enterprises or through the work of the social organizations. Dr. Felix Adler of the Ethical Culture Society served on the Drexel Committee to investigate housing. Robert W. DeForest was another of the most prominent figures of the day. He was for years president of the Charity Organization Society and a member of other social organizations. His chief interest lay in housing reform. E. R. L. Gould, a Johns Hopkins lecturer, writer, and later Columbia professor, made a notable contribution to housing improvement by organizing the City and Suburban Homes Company of New York (1896) with the object of providing comfortable homes at moderate prices. The picturesque work of Nathan Straus, the merchant philanthropist, in establishing baby milk stations and in selling coal at a cheap rate to the poor during the panic of 1893, should be mentioned.¹² His efforts to have piers used for recreation were partly successful and a number of such piers were established later in the 1890's. Richard Watson Gilder's work as philanthropist and reformer merits special notice. He was greatly interested in housing reform and served on the legislative committee appointed in 1894 to investigate housing conditions in New York.

Social-work leaders had frequent contacts with one another and were well acquainted. It was easy to "drop in" at Mrs. Lowell's and discuss various social problems.¹³ The doors of the settlements were always open. The pioneer character of the task aroused an enthusiasm which sometimes caused overlapping. But at least it may be seen that

¹² Lina G. Straus (Ed.), *Disease in Milk—The Remedy Pasteurization. The Life Work of Nathan Straus* (New York, 1917), pp. 119-123, 187-194, 201-206.

¹³ Jacob Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library); interviews with Mr. Riis's friends.

there were many agencies and individuals who really cared for the poor and were trying to formulate some program to help.

New York social workers were not unaware of what was going on in social lines abroad. The cable, mails from Europe, travelers returning, kept them in close touch. Europe, they knew, was gripped by the Industrial Revolution and showed urban trends as marked as those in the United States. On every hand socialists were urging redistribution of wealth; and trade unions were clamoring for fewer hours and better pay. Germany,¹⁴ with her program of State Socialism, was striding forward in the hope of a better day. In the last few years of the century, she passed three social insurance laws and lent state aid to employers so that they could improve the homes of their working-men. France also was waking up to reform of all kinds. She enacted a law for a working-men's council to build better homes for the poor, and the city of Paris opened shelters for homeless women and men. In like manner, England, a leader in reform,¹⁵ had a number of varied activities under way to help the poor. Model-housing associations flourished; settlements, with Toynbee Hall as a shining example, were voicing the need for preserving community life. Birmingham was a leader in housing reform. Various churches and societies were meeting

¹⁴ J. H. Clapham, *The Economic Development of France and Germany 1815-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1921), pp. 189-190, 271-275, 333-338; W. H. Dawson, *Bismarck and State Socialism* (London, 1890), pp. 87-127.

¹⁵ E. P. Cheyney, *Modern English Reform* (Philadelphia, 1931), pp. 151-159, 162-176; E. L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation* (London, 1926), pp. 200-222, 280, 283; S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (Revised edition, New York, 1920), pp. 370-409; R. A. Woods, *English Social Settlements* (New York, 1897), pp. 1-259.

the needs of the poor, and at the same time extending a plan for self-improvement and self-support. Two important works from Salvation Army leaders in England depicted tenement life in all of its squalor. One of these *In Darkest England and the Way Out* had a miraculous sale of about 200,000 copies; while the other, Charles Booth's *Life and Labor of the People*, appalled a large public with its depressing picture.

There is no doubt that numerous organizations and individuals in New York received many of their ideas from Europe. For example, the idea of converting old burial plots into playgrounds for children came from England and was put into use here. So, too, the suggestion of using school buildings as evening recreation centers came from abroad. To find the man or woman who deserved praise for originating the plan would be a well-nigh impossible and perhaps an unnecessary task. Those who went into the work for sheer love of their fellow men would be the last to come forward and demand public acclaim. Many of the reforms for which Jacob Riis agitated so consistently were not his own ideas but were suggested by the reforms of others. He knew this, admitted it, and sent letters to ask for information of what was being done elsewhere. His files fairly bulged with pamphlets.

Thus it is evident that both America and Europe had awakened to the need for social reform. There were thousands of persons interested in trying to do their share to meet needs and to bring about reform legislation. Jacob Riis was in no sense an isolated figure; he was part of the big movement. What then is his contribution? It would seem as though his greatest gift lay in his ability to dramatize his message so that it appealed to a large public who might otherwise have been unmoved by social conditions.

Then, too, he had a sincere and lovable personality which inspired men with confidence in him, and drew them to the support of the measures that he advocated. We shall try to follow him to see whether our conclusions are justified as he continues his journey.

CHAPTER V

New House in Richmond Hill; "How the Other Half Lives"

I

FOR nearly ten years the Riises had lived in South Brooklyn. During that time quite a little Danish settlement had grown up around them, and Jacob and his wife had taken considerable part in the neighborhood affairs. They had helped to establish a small church with the Reverend S. Andersen as its pastor. Their three youngsters, Ed, Clara, and John, were quite sizable children now and their fourth child, little Stephen, was born in 1886.

Their home life had many of the ups and downs which characterize the average growing family—petty frictions that could be laughed at a few hours later. But there was love in plenty, too. Jacob Riis counted himself a very fortunate man to have a dear wife and a houseful of little Riises waiting to welcome him after a hard day. There was a spiritual atmosphere in the home based on the religious conviction of both parents. The Bible was the refuge of both Jacob and his wife in either joy or sorrow; and they always read to the children from this well-worn book.

He wanted his children to have adequate educational opportunities and took pains to keep in touch with the public school which they attended. He hoped that in later years they would want to continue the work of reform in which he was interested. Beyond that hope, however, he

did not appear to have any overweening ambition for their future, but preferred to let them develop according to their own interests. Mrs. Riis was inclined to give in to the youngsters on occasions; but he was more firm, and they always "came at once when he called."¹ His daughter Clara wrote: "...I remember how Father took me to the Board of Health to be vaccinated and was so proud that I had not cried. He was a loving and good Father but he did not spoil us! When we needed spankings, we got them. . . ." ²

Early in 1886, he began to look around in the suburbs with the idea of finding a home site. He wanted a big lot where the children could play and the family could have a flower garden. One afternoon when he was walking on Long Island he came across the plot he wanted; it was in Richmond Hill. At that time this section was almost rural; open spaces and fields stretched in all directions. A ferry-boat, crossing from 34th Street, docked at the Long Island shore, and from there a puffy train sped with commuters into a peaceful, rustic setting. To the tired police reporter it seemed a bit of heaven. He hurried home to Brooklyn, where the children were recovering from scarlet fever, and shouted the good news; the feeble, thin voices of the youngsters raised a cheer.³

The only drawback was the two hundred dollars for the lot. There was never anything left out of his salary; and his little savings fund had long since vanished. He might as well abandon the idea of buying. The way opened up, however. A Danish friend who was employed in an insurance company needed some policies revised. This

¹ Letter from Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske to writer, Oct. 5, 1933.

² *Ibid.*

³ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901), pp. 286-287.

was a real stroke of luck. The work meant a few midnight hours and a little extra eye-strain; but he managed to earn part of the purchase price this way. The wonderful adventure was on!

Still there was no money to build a house and no chance of saving; it began to look as though the partly-paid-for lot would lie idle a long time piling up taxes. But the prospect of restful nights in the quiet of the country was too tempting, and Riis at last determined to borrow. His old friend of the advertising campaign days, Ed Wells, now a prosperous druggist, readily lent him the money to finish paying for the lot; and the manager of the Associated Press Bureau built the house and took a mortgage for the cost.⁴

It was not a beautiful structure architecturally when it was complete, but on that day when they walked up the path to the two-story white Victorian house, shining with newness and fresh paint, it seemed the most attractive home in the world. To Jacob Riis it was a God-given spot where he could see fresh loveliness in place of dismal slums. It meant security and comfort and peace.

They set about getting acquainted right away. They had near neighbors, and the children made school friends.⁵ When they first lived in the village, Riis joined the Congregational Church, and before long he was made a deacon. He never was very much of an office-holder for he preferred the freedom of individual work. Hence, as time went on, his new duties as a church official began to weigh on him. He used to say, in later days, that his unconventional ways as police reporter seemed extraordinary to the conservative flock, who expected a more staid

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Another baby, Kathryn (or Kate as they called her), was born in 1887. We shall get better acquainted with her later.

deacon.⁶ For instance, he said that one day while talking to some of his fellow members very earnestly, he put his hand into his pocket and unwittingly drew out a pair of dice which somehow had found their way there at the *Tribune* office. He was much more comfortable after he resigned his position on the church board. Not long afterward, he began to attend the services at the Church of the Resurrection about two blocks from the home, and in 1889⁷ he and Mrs. Riis and the children were baptized.

During that first year in Richmond Hill, sorrow visited their busy, happy home. The little boy Stephen slipped away while he was yet an infant. Often on a quiet Sunday afternoon mother and father would stand beside the small grave in near-by Maple Grove Cemetery and wish for things that might have been. But that was useless, and they would turn back to the house, where active, high-spirited youngsters tumbled over one another.

By 1888 they were "old residents" of the village. Flowers brightened the garden path; birds had made nests in boxes built for them. In spring the fragrance of blossoms, the shouts of children at play, floated in to Jacob Riis as he tramped up and down in his room on a Saturday afternoon, composing articles about the ugly scenes in the city's slums. Across the river babies were dying for want of food and fresh air, while here life was serene and satisfying. It was a contrast as sharp as day and night, and something in that incongruity heightened the realism of his writings. The joys of his own children placed against the dreary tragedies of child life in the tenements accentuated his

⁶ Elsewhere he said one of the reasons why he changed his church affiliation was because he was so impressed by Bishop Potter's work (clubs, classes, etc.) at the mission in Stanton Street that he wanted to follow the same creed (J. A. Riis, *The Peril and the Preservation of the Home* (Philadelphia, 1903), p. 45).

⁷ Letter from the Reverend A. R. Cummings, Church of the Resurrection, Oct. 13, 1934 (from Church Records).

wish to procure for all the benefits which his own youngsters enjoyed.

Often, while he thus mused, or busied himself with his work, he was interrupted by the little Riises who were calling to Papa to come and see their prized possessions. As Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske wrote years later, "... each child was given a small fruit tree—mine was a cherry, a black one, Ed's a red cherry; Kate had an apple, John a pear..."⁸

Those early Richmond Hill days, happy as they were in many respects, were accompanied by nerve strain for Jacob Riis. Tremendously active during the day, he often came home at night a crumpled figure ready for a soothing word. As his daughter put it "... he sometimes came home worried and silent and... he was often away all night... he was always in love with my Mother... she was a homebody and always was there waiting for him when he came home..."⁹

The family had a little stock of anecdotes which they brought out for the amusement of guests. For instance there was the story of Jake and the chickens. It seems he had claimed to be suffering from insomnia. Now near his window there was a henhouse full of chickens; cackling fowl made merry all day and kept a sharp watch at night. These creatures proved his undoing "... he vowed he never slept night after night until he went out one morning and found the henhouse was robbed and that every hen but one was gone.... Most of them were leg-horns and, knowing the racket they can make when disturbed at night, he decided he must have been asleep after all!..."¹⁰

⁸ Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske's letter to writer, Oct. 5, 1933.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

2

It was the spring of 1888. In the afternoons the Riis children went to pick flowers; they gathered great armsful which they brought to the house for their father to carry to the "poors."¹¹ One morning, with a huge bundle of blossoms in his arms, he crossed on the ferry and began his walk down toward the office. Within a few minutes, children began to follow him, gazing wide-eyed at the lovely bouquet. They clustered around and begged for just one flower. Little fingers that never before had seen anything so lovely touched the blossoms to make sure that they were real. Riis's arms were soon empty, and he watched the urchins as they scampered into the tenements with their treasure.

The episode gave him an idea, and in the column of the paper on June 23, 1888,¹² he ran a request for flowers to brighten slum homes. He suggested that commuters could bring in some of their treasures and share them with the poor. One fresh blossom would gladden the whole day for some feverish child or shut-in mother. To encourage the plan, he volunteered the use of his office for those unable to distribute their own bouquets. Some doctors of the Health Department on their rounds would help.

Next day, to his surprise, bouquets, boxes, barrels, great sheafs of blossoms came pouring in from everywhere.¹³ Express wagons drew up to the door, children jammed the street and entrance-way, and policemen came out of headquarters to gape at the marvelous sight. Rival reporters forgot their jealousies, turned to, and handed out flowers to the hundreds of small fingers snatching for the beauti-

¹¹ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 287-289. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

¹² New York *Daily Tribune*, June 22-24, 1888.

¹³ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 289-293.

ful bits of color. In the end, as Riis wrote later, five policemen were detailed to help transport the load to the tenements. The idea was certainly a success from the standpoint of appreciative reception, but 301 Mulberry Street and Jake Riis and his companions were considerably the worse for wear after what amounted to a small mob scene!

Flowers continued to arrive daily.¹⁴ Several boxes were marked with the letters I.H.N., the symbol of the organization known as King's Daughters. Curious, Riis went to the headquarters of the group and was invited to speak at their meeting at the Broadway Tabernacle. The result was the forming of a committee to help in improving the condition of the poor; and in the summer of 1890 the earnest group opened an office in the basement of the Mariners' Temple located in the Fourth Ward. They hired a nurse to follow up many cases prescribed for by the Board of Health summer doctors. It was their intention to operate only to the end of the hot weather, but at the close of the season they found themselves with three-hundred families still needing their care. They must go on. That fall they took rooms in a tenement under the name of King's Daughters Settlement and Riis helped raise money to carry on the work. Later they moved to 48 Henry Street and became a permanent organization.¹⁵

To the outsider watching Jacob Riis's work in those late 1880's he must have seemed a veritable ball of energy bouncing here, there, and everywhere through the slum districts. He was a familiar figure with his spectacles, droopy mustache, and wing collar as he hurried through the streets. While he kept up his daily stories in the *Tribune*, he had two ideas in mind for the future: he hoped to write articles on social conditions and get them published in the magazines; and he wanted to get engage-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; King's Daughters' Report 1900-1901.

ments to lecture. Through these two additional avenues of approach he hoped to impress upon the public the dreadful character of conditions in the tenements, and the need for change. His chance came in the lecturing field first; for his ardent appeals to Dr. Schauffler, manager of the City Mission Society, and to Dr. Josiah Strong, author of *Our Country*, brought him an opportunity to appear in the Broadway Tabernacle. These occasions paved the way, and shortly afterward he was allowed to give his illustrated talks at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and at Dr. Parkhurst's Madison Square Presbyterian Church.¹⁸

Meanwhile he was trying to get a magazine to take some of his articles. *Harper's* was willing to use his pictures but preferred to have some one else write the story. At last his chance came: one of the editors of *Scribner's*, who had heard him lecture at a church, came to ask him if he would write an article on tenement conditions. He agreed, and the story, illustrated and bearing the title "How the Other Half Lives" (which he had copyrighted some time before), appeared in the December, 1889, number.

This event led to a train of highly significant developments. The publishing of the article marked a turning-point in Riis's life, although he did not have any inkling of that fact on the December day when the magazine came out.

Several days after the publication of the article, Riis was returning home late from work. He was tired and a little disheartened after a hard day. As he neared the house, the bright lamps glowed with their usual welcome. Mrs. Riis was waiting for him in the doorway. He looked at her face and knew that something had happened. She held out her hand with a letter. He looked curiously at

¹⁸ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, pp. 297-299.

the envelop, then slipped out the folded sheet, opened it, and read. It was from Jeanette Gilder of *The Critic*; if he wanted to consider enlarging his article into a book, she could suggest a publisher.¹⁷ He stared at the paper and then read it again. Then he sat down in his easy chair to think, while Mrs. Riis sat near and quietly waited.

It was awe-inspiring to think that the moment they had hoped for so long had come. He would be an author now, in demand by the public. This meant wider opportunities to tell of the work in which he thoroughly believed. His thoughts drifted on and on. So intent was he that he hardly noticed his wife's silence. At length they climbed the stairs and paused to look in on the sleeping children. As she bent over the youngest one's crib,¹⁸ a tear slipped down her cheek. At once tender-hearted Jacob understood. She wanted him to succeed; yet she was afraid his family would lose him to his career. He was so touched that he then and there vowed never to let authorship take him far away from his wife and children.

In January, 1890,¹⁹ he began to write his book. Now came nights of toil; the children would tiptoe out of the room and upstairs to bed. Mrs. Riis would sit with her sewing for a while and then slip quietly away to her room.

He was silent and worried over his writing. When the household was asleep, he would light all the lamps on the downstairs floor. Then, puffing at his pipe, he would begin to pace up and down, and pass from room to room, composing as he went. How hard it was to concentrate after an exhausting day at the office! But he would not mind if he could bring change in the ugly slums. For twenty years he had known the seamy side of New York; now was his chance to make things better. It was not

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 302-303.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

enough that the book should state the facts; its depressing truth must carry conviction.

He needed reliable figures to prove his points. Dr. Tracy, now Statistician of the Health Department, helped him by supplying many vital facts.²⁰ His reporter's notebook and his scrap-book of newspaper stories gave him other material, while his imagination, an indispensable gift, supplied the colors of the powerful picture of human woe.

The spring and summer of 1890 passed by. The manuscript was getting thicker. He was up to his ears in work, for he was not only continuing his newspaper job, but was giving lectures whenever the opportunity came. The hard toil was telling on him; he was so tired he could hardly think any more.²¹ One day he went to Boston to help discuss the subject of sweat-shops before the students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. While waiting for the hour of the meeting, he called at the home of a friend and for a few seconds stood dully trying to think of his name to send in. Again, when he was lecturing one day in a Brooklyn church, he was so dazed that he got down off the platform and took a seat in the front row, an addled spectator at his own performance. For a little while he sat there until his senses returned, then, horrified, he mounted the platform again and was relieved to find that his actions had caused no agitation. A few more weeks of strain might have been ruinous; but one day he wrote the last words of the book, looked back over the closely written pages, and knew that his big task was finished.

It was time of rejoicing²² for the little Riises; Papa's

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 306-307.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 307; letter from Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske, Oct. 5, 1933; interview with Mr. John Riis, Sept., 1933.

book was finished and they could make a noise! Mrs. Riis eyed the thick batch of papers with quiet pride; and as for Jake, he gave a cheer and then got down and turned a somersault for pure joy! Furthermore, they one and all had to have a picnic to celebrate!

Riis now handed over his manuscript to the publishers, Charles Scribner's Sons. A glance through the pages showed the provocative character of the material.²³ He described the "genesis of the tenements" and drew a line that defined "The Other Half" at the tenement-house. In 1890, he said, New York had 37,316 tenement-houses, not including flats. The tenements he blamed for many of the worst evils in the city. Here, he said, epidemics arose and brought death not only to the poor but to the well-to-do of the city alike. He pointed out that pauperism and crime were prevalent and that thousands of human wrecks were sent to the asylums and workhouses each year:

... The commonest keeper soon learns to pick out almost at sight the "cases" that will leave the penitentiary, the workhouse, the almshouse, only to return again and again, each time more hopeless, to spend their wasted lives in the bondage of the island.

The alcoholic cells in Bellevue Hospital are a way-station for a goodly share of them on their journeys back and forth across the East River. Last year they held altogether 3,694 prisoners, considerably more than one-fourth of the whole number of 13,813 patients that went in through the hospital gates. The average daily census of all the prisons, hospitals, workhouses, and asylums in the charge of the Department of Charities and Correction last year was about 14,000, and about one employee was required for every ten of this army to keep its machinery running smoothly. The total number admitted in 1889 to all the jails and institutions in the city and on the islands was 138,332. To the almshouse alone 38,600 were ad-

²³ J. A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York, 1890). (Quotations by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.)

mitted; 9,765 were there to start the new year with, and 553 were born with the dark shadow of the poorhouse overhanging their lives, making a total of 48,918.... The first cost of maintaining our standing army of paupers, criminals, and sick poor by direct taxation, was last year \$7,156,112.94. (pp. 261-2)

He told about the mixed crowd that had come to live in the tenements:

One may find for the asking an Italian, a German, a French, African, Spanish, Bohemian, Russian, Scandinavian, Jewish, and Chinese colony. Even the Arab, who peddles "holy earth" from the Battery as a direct importation from Jerusalem, has his exclusive preserves at the lower end of Washington Street. The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctively American community. There is none; certainly not among the tenements. (p. 21)

After describing the origin of the tenements, and the awakening of the public mind to the need for change he pictured some of the worst conditions which he had found. He described the stale-beer dives, the cheap lodging-houses, Chinatown with its dens of vice and miseries. He described Jewtown and introduced the readers to the Bohemian cigar-makers crowded into dismal quarters:

Take a row of houses in East Tenth Street as an instance. They contained thirty-five families of cigar-makers, with probably not half a dozen persons in the whole lot of them, outside of the children, who could speak a word of English, though many had been in the country half a lifetime. This room with two windows giving on the street, and a rear attachment without windows, called a bedroom by courtesy, is rented at \$12.25 a month. In the front room man and wife work at the bench from six in the morning till nine at night. They make a team, stripping the tobacco leaves together; then he makes the filler, and she rolls the wrapper on and finishes the cigar. For a thousand they receive \$3.75, and can turn out together three thousand cigars a week. (p. 140)

Fully as much prominence was given to the description of children who had no play places save dangerous streets and menacing alleys. He told of the street "arabs," those vagabond urchins, raising their grimy fists against society as they congregated beneath dark areaways and slept under cellar stairs. In the chapters dealing with the children, however, there was a note of hopefulness. He told of the splendid work being done by the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children and by the Children's Aid Society in behalf of the neglected and underprivileged child.

Perhaps the most striking point made in the book was the assertion that during the five years past, one person in every ten who had died in the city had been buried a pauper in Potter's Field. Impressive, too, was the statement that in the eight years from 1882 to 1890 a total of 135,595 families in New York had been registered by the Charity Organization Society as asking for or receiving relief. In other words, in a population of a million and a half, nearly a half million persons (allow an average of three and one half to a family) were being forced to beg, or at all events were begging for food. The figures did not pretend to be comprehensive; they represented only one agency's findings, and the total number of applicants for relief would have been far larger.

In one chapter Riis reviewed what had been done up to that date in the matter of tenement regulation; he mentioned the model housing attempted by the architect Alfred T. White in 1878 and again in 1890. He commended the work of Dr. Adler and the other members of the Drexel Committee, and showed how the various settlements were working for better conditions in the crowded homes. At the same time he deplored the fact that the number of tenements had increased from 14,872 in 1869, with a population of 468,692, to 37,316 (including 2,630

rear houses) in 1890, with a population estimated at 1,250,000. The drift of population to the city would probably increase for many years to come, he said, and it was absolutely necessary for something further to be done in the way of housing the poor.

In the final chapter he summed up the case. The ever-swelling crowd of wage earners was not housed decently. They must be housed in the congested area for a long time to come, because all schemes of suburban relief as yet had proved impracticable; the tenement family was paying enough rent to entitle it to be better housed, and only slothfulness on the part of those in authority was holding reform back. In conclusion, he pointed out three effective ways of dealing with the tenements: by law, by remodeling old houses, and by building new tenements on a model-housing plan. Mulberry Bend would go when all the red tape that was binding the hands of municipal effort was unwound. He prophesied the day when model houses, encouraged by subsidies, would be undertaken on a large scale. To remedy overcrowding, tenements might eventually have to be licensed, he said, to hold so many tenants and then no more.

Some idea of the reception of the book is indicated in the following excerpts: ²⁴

Mr. Jacob Riis in his description of "how the other half lives" has given us a genuine introduction to these neighbors of ours. . . . He has thoroughly explored the tenement house and the slums. . . . He has pursued these investigations with all the advantages afforded by his connection with a metropolitan newspaper, his years of experience as a police re-

²⁴ *The Dial*, April, 1891, p. 364, carried a statement made by *The Evangelist*: "... Such a study has never before been made with anything approaching to the thoroughness and insight with which Mr. Riis has conducted his investigations. The value of his book is that having revealed the evil, he is ready with a plan of remedy."

porter, and his intimate acquaintance with the chief of police. He has, moreover, personal qualities which have fitted him to an unusual degree for the task he has undertaken, being perfectly fearless, patient, a quick and careful observer, warm hearted and full of sincere interest and sympathy for the people whom he describes. The book is consequently full of life and color, and one is more and more impressed as he turns its vivid pages with the conviction that the pictures therein presented are true to life, that the author is speaking of that which he knows and testifies of that which he has seen. . . . A book like this altho it may be disheartening to read, is extremely profitable reading. It is well for us to know . . . the task that lies before the church and society in our great towns. . . . (*The Independent*, Jan. 1, 1891)

*The Christian Union*²⁵ (November 27, 1890) refers to the book, in an article called "Darkest New York" as follows:

We gave large space last week to an account of General Booth's striking picture of "Darkest England"; we surrender still larger space this week to Mr. Riis's account of "Darkest New York." These companion pictures, dark and ominous in line and color, ought to stir in the prosperous, the happy, and the indolent a sense of misery of a large part of their fellow-beings, and stimulate them to practical action. "How the other half lives" is a department of knowledge which has been greatly neglected, but it is a kind of knowledge which modern society must master if it would preserve itself.

Elsewhere in the same issue of the magazine there is a detailed review of the contents of the book under the title "A Glimpse of Darkest New York."

The Critic (December 27, 1890) sets forth many of the main points of the book and concludes with the statement:

His book is literally a photograph and as such has its value and lesson, but also its serious limitations. There is a lack of

²⁵ Later *The Outlook*.

broad and penetrative vision, a singularly warped sense of justice at times, and a roughness amounting almost to brutality. The "Heathen Chinees" and the Russian Jew fleeing from persecution in his own land, find no mercy in Mr. Riis's creed. In contrast we would refer the reader to Gen. Booth's book "In Darkest England" where the true Christ-spirit is made manifest—the gospel of love and ministration which sees in human misery and sin only the divine opportunity of fuller sympathy and regeneration. (p. 332)

The Nation (February 5, 1891) carried a review of the book and commented as follows:

This book exhibits two tendencies that are especially prominent in these latter days. One is the disposition to study the pathology of society, to examine the manner of life of criminals, paupers, beggars and incapables generally; the other is the propensity to regard social therapeutics as consisting in a change of material conditions....

Mr. Riis...has evidently been animated by the best of motives in making this study of the dark side of life in the city of New York; and while he is occasionally overcome by the appalling character of the sights that he has personally witnessed, his account of them is generally marked by sobriety and self-restraint. He does not quite lose sight of the fact that not all the dwellers in tenement houses are on the point of starving to death, or live under vile conditions. His aim is to let us know the worst, and it is not surprising that special emphasis should be laid upon whatever intensifies the darkness, but he allows us at least to see that there is another side. His book is by no means so thorough and even scientific as that compiled by Mr. Booth upon East London, but it is an excellent presentation of many superficial aspects of the life of the poor in a great city. He takes us with him on his visits to Gotham Court and Cherry Hill, to Chinatown and Jewtown and Little Italy, to "The Bend" and "Hell's Kitchen" and Murderers' Row, and he tells us what is there to be seen and heard and smelt. There is much sameness in it all, and the difficulties of the situation are as manifest at the beginning of the tour as at the end. These difficulties Mr. Riis does not seem to us fully to appreciate. (p. 121)

The book was an immediate success. An interested public hastened to buy copies; letters of inquiry poured in; schools, churches, social organizations, wrote and asked Riis to lecture. He had leaped into prominence as an authority on tenement conditions.

Riis was puzzled over the turn affairs had taken. He had tried to present in a plain way the facts which he had found in the course of his daily work.²⁶ It surprised him to see how new these facts were to the average person; he tried to account for the popularity of the book by reason of the fortunate title. He thought William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* must have stimulated many to read his own book out of mere curiosity to know what conditions in America were like.

²⁶ Miss Ellen Collins, who had experimented in model housing on the East Side, objected to Riis's painting of an all-dark picture. He replied that he had purposely done this in order to arouse conscience and excite sympathy. (Letters dated June 7, Sept. 16, 28, 29, 1893, in Russell Sage Library.)

CHAPTER VI

The Biggest Scoop—Croton; Max Comes

I

PROMINENCE seems to have had little effect upon Riis's personality. Although he must have felt a good deal of pride over being able to succeed after his early trials in this country, he was still "as plain as an old shoe." He was glad to see the book bring in some extra money, for there were always many needs in the growing family; but chiefly he was pleased because he now received more invitations to speak about the tenements and there was a demand for his writings. In spite of the fact that he was busier than ever with new calls upon him, he still found plenty of time to enjoy the little incidents of everyday life in Mulberry Street. His hearty laugh would ring out across to Police Headquarters and cause even the most crabbed old official to spare a smile.¹

The publication of *How the Other Half Lives* was doubly significant because it brought him one of the greatest friends of his life, Theodore Roosevelt. One day shortly after the publication of the book, while Riis was out of his office, Roosevelt climbed the steps and knocked at the door. Finding the reporter out, he left his card with a message on the back: "I have read your book, and I have come to help." It did not take Riis long to respond to the note. As yet Roosevelt was but a rising politician who happened to be also a member of a promi-

¹ Interviews with his friends.

nent New York family—he was not yet powerful enough to put through large-scale reforms; but he promised Jake that if ever he did have sufficient power he would see that reforms were made.

There was a certain similarity between these two men. Both were active and energetic; there was in both the same quality of friendliness and lack of affectation in meeting acquaintances. By some persons they were considered similar in appearance, both being of rather short stature and square build. They both wore spectacles and had drooping mustaches. On more than one occasion, Riis was actually mistaken for Roosevelt.

Roosevelt was much impressed² with the directness and sincerity of Riis, and Riis had the same feeling about Roosevelt—in fact, Riis's devotion to his friend amounted to absolute hero-worship. On one occasion in the course of those early years of their friendship, Roosevelt referred to Jake as³ the "most useful citizen in New York," a designation which clung long after Mulberry Street days were gone.

In the summer of 1890 Riis had a dispute⁴ with the manager of the Associated Press Bureau (*The Tribune* was no longer a copartner). As a result he decided to do independent work. For several months he ran an opposition shop, selling police news to all the papers. He made money, but he soon realized that he could not carry the extra strain very long. In November, 1890, on the same day on which his book came out, he joined the staff of the *Evening Sun*. In addition to this regular work he covered assignments for the morning paper, *The Sun*, and wrote on a space arrangement for several other papers.

² T. Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt, An Autobiography* (New York, 1913), pp. 70, 210-211.

³ Interviews with friends of Mr. Riis.

⁴ Mr. Riis's scrap-book (R. W. Riis collection).

The following titles from his scrap-book clippings during the next few months give some idea of the nature of his interests:

Evening Sun

Nov. 15, 1890	Kid McManus's Girl
Jan. 15, 1891	How a Farmer Was Robbed
Feb. 10, 1891	Water from the Old Tank
Apr. 28, 1891	On Small-Pox Island
June 5, 1891	This Is Dannebrog's Day
June 6, 1891	The City's Unclaimed Dead
Aug. 6, 1891	Toys For Sick Children

The main offices of *The Sun* were located in a dingy old building at 170 Nassau Street. Here, too, was housed the *Evening Sun*, under the same control. *The Sun* was an independent newspaper which frankly criticized and praised political figures of the day. For instance, it condemned Cleveland during his first campaign, but supported him for a second term. The paper was noted for its human-interest stories and for compelling titles.⁵ Three-story head-lines were a regular feature.

Charles A. Dana, editor of *The Sun*, was one of the great personalities in nineteenth-century journalism. He dominated the policies of the paper for thirty years (1867-97). He was a scholarly man, alert, sympathetic, and interested in a wide range of topics. He was described as "largely built, square-framed, with a step as firm as a sea-captain's, vigorous sometimes to abruptness in his bodily movements, but deliberate and gentle in his speech."⁶ He set definite standards for his reporters: they should if possible be grounded in the classics; they should seek the truth; they should exercise fair play in the handling of news. Above all, their stories must be interesting.

⁵ F. M. O'Brien, *The Story of The Sun* (New York, 1928), pp. 148-200.

⁶ E. P. Mitchell, "Mr. Dana of the Sun," *McClure's*, III (Oct., 1894), p. 374.

Mr. Dana was assisted by his son, Paul Dana, who was in sympathy with his father's policies. Another associate was William Laffan, publisher and part owner of *The Sun*. He was a moving spirit of the *Evening Sun* for many years. His delightful Irish wit enlivened the atmosphere of the office. Another member of *The Sun* staff was Edward P. Mitchell, editorial writer. He was a man of broad sympathies and interests. Other well-known figures were Chester S. Lord, managing editor; Mayo Williamson Hazeltine, literary critic; Amos J. Cummings, referred to by his colleagues as the best all-round news man of his day. The *Evening Sun* staff had its own personnel. In 1890, Arthur Brisbane was managing editor, and William McCloy⁷ was city editor. One of the star reporters was young Richard Harding Davis.

Riis's associations in the main office were congenial, but he often disagreed with the editorial policies of *The Sun*. In his autobiography he writes:⁸ "It seemed as if it were impossible for anybody to get farther apart in most things on earth and off it than were my paper and I. It hated and persecuted Beecher and Cleveland; they were my heroes. It converted me to Grant by its opposition to him. . . ." Yet he found his employers sympathetic and willing to give him the chance to work out his own theories. He expresses his appreciation in the following lines:⁹

They let me have in pretty nearly everything my own way, though it led us so far apart. As time passed and the duties that came to me took more and more of my time from my office work, I found that end of it insensibly lightened to allow me to pursue the things I believed in, though they did not. No doubt the old friendship that existed between my

⁷ McCloy later succeeded Brisbane as managing editor.

⁸ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 371. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

immediate chief on the Evening Sun, William McCloy, and myself, bore a hand in this. Yet it could not have gone on without the assent and virtual sympathy of the Danas, father and son; for we came now and then to a point where opposite views clashed and proved irreconcilable. Then I found these men, whom some deemed cynical, most ready to see the facts as they were, and to see justice done.

Shortly after the publication of his book there was a conflict in his mind as to whether he should give up his newspaper duties and devote his time to writing articles and books and giving lectures. He thoroughly enjoyed the adventures of reporting. On the other hand, he had confidence that his other writings would also reach a wide public and he was torn between the two attractions. Perhaps what turned the scale in the end was the consideration that so long as he kept his fifty-dollar-a-week salary he was sure of being able to meet family expenses.

His problem of finding time to get his work done was partly solved by a very fortunate circumstance. On February 16, 1891,¹⁰ a young Jewish man, Max Fischel, came to work for him as an assistant, or "news gatherer." The round-faced Max was obliging and faithful; moreover, he had an excellent nose for news. He could cover a prodigious number of assignments and come back with the facts. As time went on, he took more and more responsibility off Riis's hands. Some said he developed into almost as good a reporter as Riis, but Max himself modestly laid the credit to the door of his teacher.

In those good old horse-car days of the early nineties, Max would be at work by seven o'clock in the morning. He would get early police bulletins and dash away. On his return from his early rounds, laden with notes, he would find Riis in the office. Then they would get down to busi-

¹⁰ Interview with Mr. Max Fischel, 1933.

ness. Max would perch on the waste-paper basket turned upside down and go over the material with Jake. Then Jake would take some sheets of paper and a pencil and bend to his task. With a far-away look in his eyes he would sit for a few minutes, thinking. Then he would begin to write and would sit there composing one story after another until his big job was finished. By the time the copy was ready, the corns on his fingers were harder still from holding the pencil so long.¹¹

It was always a revelation to Max how Riis could take a mass of information and put his finger on the salient feature of it all from the standpoint of human interest. An example of his method was as follows: ¹²

A disaster had occurred. One whole block had been the victim of terrible trouble; some lives had been lost. I hurried to the office and informed "Jake" Riis and he went with me to the scene. There we found an excited, wailing crowd. I was so busy trying to get the facts that I lost sight of him for a moment. Suddenly I looked up the block and saw Jake standing on a doorstep—just standing. He was listening to the moans of the crowd as the sounds moved up and down the street. The moans of those poor people made his story.

In August, 1891, he made what he always referred to in later years as his biggest beat.¹³ One day he appeared in the Health Department and picked up the weekly analysis of the Croton Water Supply. The report showed that a trace of nitrites had been present for two weeks. With curiosity aroused at what seemed to be concern on the part of Department officials, Riis pushed his questions until he learned that presence of nitrites meant that the city water supply had at some time been contaminated

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ New York *Evening Sun*, Aug. 1 to Sept. 21, 1891; Mr. Riis's scrap-book (R. W. Riis collection).

with sewerage. If this condition should persist, the whole of New York would be endangered, and such a dread disease as cholera might sweep the town. Immediately he hurried to his office and wrote a story warning the people to boil their water.

SEWAGE IN CROTON WATER

THE HEALTH OFFICERS CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR DISCOVERY

*The Report Says a Very Faint Trace of
Nitrates Has Been Discovered, But
Even That is Enough to Alarm Folks*

The attention of the Health Officers has been drawn sharply to the condition of the Croton water by analyses made during the last few weeks. To put the matter plainly, it shows traces of sewer contamination. It is nothing to get excited about; the traces are slight as yet. . . .

Having sent that message, he made plans to leave immediately for the Croton watershed. Health Department officials were inspecting conditions at this source and he not only followed in their steps but did some independent investigation. He spent a week following all the streams feeding into the shed; and as he went, he took pictures. He found that towns were emptying their waste matter into these waters, that inhabitants were bathing themselves in the streams, and that village dumps were situated on the banks. As fast as he could assemble his findings, he forwarded them to the *Evening Sun*. On August 21st, under the caption "Some Things We Drink," he wrote a five-column story which was printed with illustrations taken from his photographs.

For more than two weeks in all, he supplied the facts and urged the Health Department to demand legislative

action. Reporters from the other newspapers were inclined at first to scoff at Riis; it looked to them as though he might be making a mountain out of a mole-hill in order to get news during a dull month. The editors of his paper, however, supported him in the undertaking and printed a triumphant editorial on August 26th, pointing to these exposures as "the most important matter that has been brought before the inhabitants of New York since the last cholera epidemic." In time the other newspapers had to admit the value of the articles and give credit to the *Evening Sun*. As a result of the disclosures and subsequent pressure brought by the State Board of Health, the city opened negotiations and later bought property immediately surrounding the watershed.

2

Riis's office was a favorite spot for persons in all walks of life. As Jake sat at his desk working, the most varied assortment of individuals came to his door. Rich men with pet theories rode up in their carriages to get the reformer's opinion. Politicians turning soft-hearted at Christmastide would drop by to get Jake's suggestions about helping some needy family. Stranded Danes, lonely and friendless, found practical matter-of-fact advice at 301; Jake always remembered the grim months of 1870 and put his hand in his pocket.¹⁴

By this time, Riis's association with Dr. Tracy had deepened into a treasured friendship. The latter was now Registrar of Records at the Board of Health, and Jake had occasion to see him every day—sometimes several times a day during the week, and occasionally on Sundays. Every morning he would go to the Doctor's office for a chat, and in the afternoons they would walk uptown together from

¹⁴ Interviews with friends, 1933.

Mulberry Street as far as the 34th Street Ferry. Dr. Tracy's letter¹⁵ throws some light on Riis's physical condition during this period and also on his pleasant relations with the Health officials:

It was on one of these walks in the early 90's that I first became apprehensive that he was injuring his health by smoking [cigars]—he said he always smoked rapidly like that and occasionally felt a slight intoxication from it—I warned him seriously of the danger of tobacco heart but I do not think he changed his habit in that respect until 1901....

... For four years [after the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*] until the death of Dr. Janes and Major Bullard, Riis would come over about four o'clock when the office hours were over and we would have a little discussion in Major Bullard's room. Dr. Janes was old and conservative. Major Bullard had been an active political worker and was apt to view Riis's philanthropic projects with a cynical eye. He [Riis] was always brimful of plans, boiling over with enthusiasm, and he thought it did him good, as he told me to have a little cold water dashed over them by these old friends. He said he learned in these talks to recognize that there were two sides to everything and the criticism of Janes and Bullard gave him a mental balance that he never lost.

A composite picture of Riis's active day in this period of the early 1890's was somewhat as follows: In the very early morning, he hurried to catch the train for the ferry; then he crossed to New York. At 120 East 30th Street he was apt to pause and go up the steps of Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell's brownstone house to have a chat with her about tenement conditions, police lodging-houses, and a number of other topics in which they were both interested.¹⁶ From Mrs. Lowell's home he would continue on his way to the office where the unfailing Max would be

¹⁵ Written to Mrs. Riis after Mr. Riis's death in 1914.

¹⁶ W. R. Stewart, *The Philanthropic Work of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (New York, 1911), p. 527.

ready with material for stories. After writing at the office, he would step over to the Police Department and hobnob with some official, and drop in on the Health Department offices to see whether there was any news. From there he would perhaps go to the tenements to follow up a lead. By that time the morning would be well over; and before proceeding to his afternoon rounds, he would snatch a hasty bite at some "beanery" in the neighborhood.¹⁷ Then, on the run, he would be off to attend some welfare meeting in his capacity of reporter and interested reformer; there he would encounter friends such as John H. Finley, Secretary of the State Charities Aid in 1891 and 1892, and Dr. Jane E. Robbins of the College Settlement. From the meeting he might go to keep an appointment with Richard Watson Gilder, poet-editor of the *Century Magazine* and civic reformer.

When the afternoon drew to a close he would return to the office to do some writing; or, if his work was done, he would "swap" jokes with some of his fellow reporters.¹⁸ Then he would join Dr. Tracy for the stroll uptown to the ferry, and soon he was on the train, looking forward to a happy evening at 524 North Beech Street.

When he arrived at home a cheerful family would be waiting with tales of the day's doings. Dinner, served by the maid-of-all-work, was a jolly meal; the children would tell Papa about what a favorite Mama was with their friends; and sometimes he would jot down some such note as this: ¹⁹

The Fire Company organized [July 18, 1891] Ed. foreman.
The gang presents itself at the house with a big dog. . . . Dog
is discussed and a bonfire organized in lot for practice.

¹⁷ Interview with Mr. John Riis, Sept., 1933.

¹⁸ Interview with Max Fischel, 1933.

¹⁹ R. W. Riis collection.

The Weekly is changed into "The Fireside." Mama becomes assistant editor and expresses the opinion that the community is not much if it can't back up the fire company. She is elected an honorary member of the Company and gets invitation to reception "In the barn behind the Drug Store." Mama is really wanted to buy the ice cream. She is going.

After dinner was over the family would entertain friends, or if there was no company, would drift away to their separate pursuits. Riis would draw his chair near the lamp and glance over the newspaper while his wife darned stockings. Then, after a little chat, he would take out paper and pencil to write an article. If he finished this work before bedtime, he would read it to Mrs. Riis and ask for criticism. Sometimes they would stop to hum an old Danish air.

This account of a day's activities gives perhaps a misleading impression of orderliness; for, while Riis had a certain system of procedure and a rather canny way of managing to complete his work, interruptions would come and change his whole schedule. He did not seriously object to the uncertainty of his program, however, for variety lent fascination to routine.

3

Next to the evils of the tenements and the need of playgrounds for children, the subject which interested him most was the police lodging-house situation. Roosevelt had promised his support in a clean-up, but the day when he would have power to take action was yet distant. Civic groups had the matter in mind; but the lodging-houses still remained. On January 31, 1892, Riis wrote a signed story for the New York *Tribune* urging city authorities to take some step. The following excerpt gives an idea of his approach:

*VICE WHICH IS UNCHECKED IN POLICE
STATION LODGING-HOUSES*

TERRIBLE SCENES IN STIFLING BASEMENTS—
OUTCASTS WHO ARE DEEP IN THE MIRE

The lamps at the door of the Church St. police station looked down the deserted street like dull green eyes at 2 o'clock on a recent morning when a carriage rolled up to the curb. A man stepped out and handed down three women. . . .

After describing the conditions which these visitors saw, he continued:

When the matter was discussed before the Mayor last year, it was objected that the lodgers are all tramps. . . . I have shown this to be false. Even if it were true, the city would have no right to offer as charity anything fit only for tramps, or to recognize their tribe by providing shelter for it on its own level. The question under discussion then was the establishment of so-called municipal lodging houses. Five years ago a law was passed authorizing, but not ordering, the erection of one or more, on the Boston plan. . . .

The year 1892 was a notable one in the history of New York City politics, for this was the year when the picturesque Charles H. Parkhurst launched his vehement attack upon the whole Tammany system. In a sermon on the text "Ye Are the Salt of the Earth," preached from his pulpit at Madison Square Presbyterian Church on February 14, 1892,²⁰ Dr. Parkhurst brought down upon the Tiger's head the storm which other city reformers had been preparing. He was challenged to give proof and he came forward with startling facts showing corruption in the police force—bribery, acceptance of fees from houses

²⁰ C. H. Parkhurst, *My Forty Years in New York* (New York, 1923), pp. 104-145. He was head of the Society for Suppression of Vice.

of prostitution, and graft of every kind. So serious was the nature of the evidence that a legislative investigation was demanded, and the famous Lexow Committee was appointed to investigate and report.

The excitement down in Mulberry Street may well be imagined. Riis and his fellow reporters stepped over to Police Headquarters and found a gloomy crowd. Some old busybody was always meddling in other people's affairs, said more than one disgruntled policeman as he wondered how long he should be able to keep his job. Probably Republican doings and Boss Platt's work, growled a fat captain, as he prepared to pack up and go. At Jake's office there was rarely a dull moment during this period.

4

During this year, 1892, his second book, *The Children of the Poor*, came off the press. It was dedicated to his children in the hope that they would carry on the work of reform. This work dealt with much the same type of material as *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis thought it had more strength; but it never received the same acclaim. In this volume he told the appealing story of Tony, the urchin who, though hardened by street life, responded to a gift of flowers and a kindly word. This story grew into a famous lecture called "Tony" which Riis was very fond of giving all over the country in later years.

In the book he deplored the serious labor situation which had arisen as a result of the amazing increase in immigrants from Southern Europe since 1890. While he believed in giving the immigrant a chance in the new world, he was in favor of exercising some form of control. He decried the indiscriminate opening of the ports to those who would still further overcrowd the slums and aggravate labor ills. He wrote of "the tyranny of so-called

organized labor in denying to our own children a fair chance to learn honest trades, while letting in foreign workmen in shoals to crowd our market under the plea of the 'solidarity of labor,' a policy that is a fair way of losing to labor all the respect due it from our growing youth."

He made a strong appeal for the establishment of a truant court for juvenile offenders; the past legislature had authorized one, but there the matter had rested. Likewise he reviewed the movement for child welfare, including an account of the founding of the S.P.C.C., and told of the splendid achievement of the *Tribune* Fresh Air Fund in sending 94,000 children for vacations during the period 1882 to 1891.

In this book he also made a powerful plea in favor of allowing city school buildings to be used in the evening by boys' clubs; he contended that wholesome recreation would keep youths away from gangs. And as a reminder of the great need for play space in the congested city, he said, "There are no play grounds yet below 14th Street and room and need for 50."

In addition to completing the book this year, Riis was working on some magazine articles. For the December, 1892, issue of *The Forum* he wrote: "Special Needs of the Poor in New York." "To measure the poverty problem in New York," he said, "one must reckon with half the political, economic, and social troubles of the old world. . . ." From 20 to 30 per cent of the population is "always struggling to keep the wolf away from the door . . ." he asserted. He found the system of public relief inadequate—too often it handed out material aid without attempting to meet the underlying difficulties of the needy. Private charity had learned much, he believed, but had failed to prevent poverty. He pointed out that much

had been done during the past ten years in the way of organizing private charity and he commended the work of the Charity Organization Society, but he thought the work suffered for lack of enough volunteers to help.

In the article he offered several solutions to the problems of poverty. He suggested the establishment of a central labor bureau to bring work and worker together under circumstances that would inspire confidence. He suggested that a committee of representatives from charitable societies be appointed to watch bills at Albany regarding the tenement-house law; this committee could protest "when anything goes wrong."

He advocated the restriction of immigration, but realizing that such a measure would not be soon taken, he turned his attention to a plan for helping the children of immigrants. He would gather these children into kindergartens and industrial schools while they were very young. He would urge stricter enforcement of the Compulsory Education Law, the appointment of a sufficient number of truant officers, and the establishment of a truant home. He urged that the birth certificate of children be required of every child seeking a job in a factory so that exploitation of the foreign-born could be curbed.

In the concluding passages of the article he proposed that a house or home for crippled children be established in the country and that a special court be founded for the trial of juvenile offenders. He deplored the violation of the law forbidding the selling of liquor to minors and urged stricter enforcement of the law. Finally, he said, clubs should be formed to take the place of saloons. There young men could meet and discuss current topics and in time become informed voters interested in better government and in improved social conditions.

The article written in a brief, direct form is valuable for its analysis of social problems in New York in the early 1890's and for its emphasis on preventive treatment. It deserves a place among Riis's more important writings.

CHAPTER VII

The Old Town Again—On a Visit

I

IN the midst of their busy life, Mr. and Mrs. Riis thought often of their relatives across the sea. Fifteen years had now passed since they had ridden away a bride and groom from Ribe. They had frequently talked of the day when they should surprise the old folks with a visit; but the trip had always been too expensive. Jacob had a pardonable pride in wanting to return to his native town where he could now appear as a man of accomplishment. By the spring of 1893 they checked up their bank account and found that with economy they could have a summer trip to Denmark. The children went around in a state of happy excitement; six-year-old Katie bustled about helping her mother put the finishing touches to the packing; and on the scheduled day in May they were ready to go.

They made quite a little crowd as they walked up the gangplank: Ed and Clara, half-grown youngsters, had spruced themselves up mightily for the big occasion; John and Kate fairly beamed with joy; Jake Riis and his wife, smiling joyfully, martialed their brood to the deck. A New York politician whom Jake had exposed on several occasions had been reported as saying that he hoped the boat with Jake on it would sink.¹ Despite that unpleasant thought the family remained cheerful!

¹ Letter from Mrs. Clara Riis Fiske to writer, Oct. 5, 1933.

The moment of sailing came. Jacob stood at the ship rail and looked at the disappearing shore with mingled feelings of happiness and regret. In his case New York had seemed truly to blossom into a land of opportunity. He had criticized slum conditions, to be sure, but only because he wished the best for his adopted country. He was an intensely loyal American patriot. During his busy life in New York, he had hardly taken time in years to rest. Now the very quiet of the sea gave him a feeling of being lost. But Denmark, home, was ahead. The momentary wistfulness fled, and he was soon like a boy enjoying the trip.

On the last day he strained his eyes to catch the first glimpse of his beloved land. There it was! There was Elsinore, yonder was Hamlet's Castle. He felt a lump in his throat.²

At Copenhagen they paid a brief visit to Mrs. Riis's foster-mother, Mrs. Gjortz, who had been living in the city for many years now, since ill fortune had swept away the family wealth. At last they were on the train drawing near Ribel! They were pulling into the station! Jacob looked for the first glimpse of his parents. His mother was there, welcoming him with the old smile. The sorrows of twenty years had left their lines, for one by one all of her children except Jacob and Sofie, the two youngest, and the adopted daughter, Emma, had died;³ but the trouble etched on that dear face only made it more lovely to the son who had been absent so long. And his father?⁴ Ah! there he was; the same and yet not the same; an old white-haired man looking at him with almost pathetically proud eyes. And here was Emma, too, middle-aged now.

² J. A. Riis, "Hamlet's Castle," *The Century*, LXI (Jan., 1901), p. 388.

³ Several sons had died of tuberculosis.

⁴ Letter from Jacob Riis to Dr. Jane E. Robbins, 1895 (Dr. Robbins' collection).

She was at once his friend again as in the childhood days. And here was little Sofie—a grown woman in her twenties!

Inside the house, there was a moment of silence. Jacob's inquiring eyes forgot and looked around for the brothers who had slipped away; but soon there was a bustle and a babel of voices with many relatives and friends crowding around to see Niels Edward Riis's boy Jacob and his big family.

This trip home to Denmark was satisfying in many ways. It was good to see the old town much as it was when he left it. The storks still stood on one leg on the chimney tops. The country doctor, Kjar, still made his rounds in his buggy, and the watchman still called the hour.

If Riis thought Ribe had changed but little, he must have been impressed by the developments which were going on in the country as a whole at that time. As we have seen in an earlier chapter, the Danish War of 1864 had left the little country poor and desperate. With increasing competition in the grain markets, her farmers had been faced with ruin. In order to survive she had been obliged to introduce changes in agriculture and industry.⁵ Consequently, the period from 1870 on—that is, the time Riis had been absent from Denmark—was one of marked growth in coöperative farming and in the modernization of machinery. Because of the great economic development, thousands had continued to flock into the cities, and the municipal fathers had turned their attention to meeting the problem of overcrowding and poor sanitation. Working-men's societies, which had begun to appear in the

⁵ International Labor Office, *International Survey of Social Sciences* (Geneva, 1933), pp. 156-180; *Denmark, Its Medical Organization, Hygiene and Demography*, pp. 128-137, 143-181, 222, 238-248; Hugh Jones, *Modern Denmark, Its Social, Economic and Agricultural Life* (London, 1927), pp. 32-46; J. A. Riis, "Coöperation in Denmark, etc.," *The Craftsman*, XXIII (March, 1913), pp. 609-614.

1860's, had now sprung up all over the country to help get better dwellings and better labor conditions. The national government had responded to the change in social conditions by providing more adequate relief for the poor and old. In the year 1891, for instance, a law was passed authorizing old-age pensions. There was an impressive alertness to the need for social betterment.

The stay in Ribe was even more delightful than Riis had expected it to be. He found his father an understanding companion. They talked of Jacob's work, and the former schoolmaster was able to give the social reformer some bits of helpful advice. Jacob had written to the Danish king to ask why his father had not received the Dannebrog Medal, which it was customary for the Crown to bestow on subjects who had given long and faithful service. It turned out that the failure to bestow the medal was caused by a mere technicality. As soon as the King's attention was called to the matter, the medal had been sent. Now the father, knowing nothing of why this had come about, proudly showed it to his son. As for Jacob's mother, she was enjoying the little Riises. They were strange youngsters indeed with all their American talk, but they were her boy's children, and that was enough.

What Jacob Riis liked best of all to do was to walk with his sister Emma in the direction of Elisabeth's old home. The Gjortzes had moved away shortly after the Danish War. Mrs. Riis never wanted to revisit the place; the memories of her first betrothal and her estrangement from her family were apparently too moving. So Jacob and Emma went on their jaunt, and every time when they reached the house, Jacob would reënact the whole scene of his proposal to Elisabeth.

But the pleasant summer could not last forever; all too soon came the necessity of returning to America and

to work. Mr. Riis's daughter, Kate, has given a little incident of the voyage home: ⁶

... Perhaps my earliest impression of my Father, and one which I always kept, was of a man in whom all the courage in the world was assembled, and who had absolutely *no* fear of anything or anybody on this earth.... When I was about six years old, we were returning from a trip to Denmark on the old "Norge", (which was sunk off Rockall in July, 1904). The ship was even then in bad condition and barely seaworthy. In mid-Atlantic, somewhere, a terrific hurricane swept upon us, laying the old ship over on its side in such a way that there were those on board who doubted that it would ever right itself again. Well can I remember the fear and the confusion on board. In the salon where the passengers had assembled, many people had thrown themselves on their knees, and, with uplifted hands, were praying passionately. I remember my father taking me firmly yet tenderly by the hand and walking with me up and down, up and down the salon, in and out between the groups of terror-stricken people, while the old boat rolled and pitched, sometimes sending us running this way and sometimes that. My father, who knew the danger only too well, and had thus taken his youngest child under his care, was very quiet and very firm about it, and never, somehow, let me be afraid. I knew something amazing and quite terrifying to others was happening, but wasn't I with my father and wasn't he thoroughly calm and undisturbed? He stood out in that terrified group as a tower of strength and fearlessness.

2

When Riis returned to work he heard much talk of the serious economic situation of the country. Shortly after President Cleveland's inauguration on March 4, 1893, a financial depression which had for some time been impending spread over the United States. The causes were numerous; among the most important were overinvest-

⁶ Letter from Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre to writer, Dec. 6, 1934.

ment in railways and in industrial combinations, too great speculation, and a widespread depression in Europe which began in 1889, and which had led many foreign capitalists to withdraw gold previously invested in American business. Then, too, business groups feared the rising silver inflation movement under the Sherman Act, which they thought would cause suspension of gold payments and lead to a financial insecurity.⁷

The general economic situation of the nation naturally made itself felt in New York.⁸ The purses of many rich men were flat; white-collar workers had a hard time to keep their jobs. Thousands of residents of New York were reduced to the poverty line and a multitude of non-resident men and women descended upon the city in the hope of finding jobs. Every cheap lodging-house was full; those who had no money slept in the doorways along the Bowery. The police lodging-houses, still the only temporary shelter offered by a laggard city government, accommodated the dregs of society as well as unfortunate youths caught by hard times. Welfare organizations were taxed to the limit to provide relief.

Because Riis had been writing of the transient problem, of overcrowding, and of unemployment for years, he did not find the conditions of 1893 something strange or new. They were an exaggeration of the usual state of affairs in the slum districts in which he worked. Hence he does not seem to have engaged in any extraordinary activities in this first year of depression, nor does he appear to have devoted much time to philosophizing over causes of the slump. He did, however, serve on the Committee on Va-

⁷ A. M. Schlesinger, *Political and Social History of the United States* (New York, 1932), pp. 395-397.

⁸ Reports of leaders made at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1894.

grancy of the Conference of Charities of New York City,⁹ of which Mrs. Lowell was chairman;¹⁰ he helped the committee to draw up resolutions, which were presented to the Mayor, showing the need of more adequate provision for the homeless. He hoped that the action of this group would so center attention on the evils of the police lodging-houses that the city would at last substitute a better system. But he saw days and weeks drag by and nothing done.

⁹ The committee wished to have the city provide a scientifically run municipal shelter. A farm colony for vagrants was also a part of their dream.

¹⁰ Letters from Mrs. Lowell to Riis dated Feb. 27, Dec. 4 and 16, 1893; Jan. 29 and 30, 1896, in Russell Sage Library (MSS).

CHAPTER VIII

Municipal House Cleaning

I

THE year 1894 opened with depression still clouding the national scene. It would take several more years, business men said, to pull the country out of the hole; had that not been true after the 1873 panic? While the people of America were still talking about the 1893 World's Fair, and marveling at its success in the face of hard times.

In New York the paramount topic was the impending investigation of the Police Department. Throughout the year 1893 the public had first been critical of Dr. Parkhurst and then had veered more and more to his side. Finally, in January, 1894, the Chamber of Commerce drew up a resolution asking for a senatorial inquiry, and on January 30th, a Committee¹ was appointed, to begin February 15, 1894, and continue until the next session of the Senate.² Senator Clarence Lexow was made Chairman of the Committee. Civic-minded citizens were gratified because they believed that Tammany corruption would be exposed and that a new and better administration was coming.

Naturally Riis rejoiced in the prospect of municipal reform. The hindrance to action might now be removed

¹ Senate Document No. 27.

² *Investigation of the Police Department of the City of New York* (5 vols.), proceedings from March 9, 1894, to Dec. 29, 1894 (Albany).

in the case of Mulberry Bend and the police-station lodgings, and numerous measures in which he was interested might now be made possible.

While he was joyfully watching reform developments, he received the sad news of his father's death. Suddenly it seemed as though the bottom had dropped from under him. The brief but happy visit home to Denmark the year before had opened the way to an understanding comradeship. Now he felt lost. Some idea of his grief is conveyed in the following letter, which he sent to Dr. Robbins upon the death of her father one year later: ³

... You cannot know how much I feel for you in the loss of your father. I lost my father last year, and I never knew until he was gone forever out of my earthly life what a friend he was to me and how much of ballast he represented in my life, though we had scarcely seen each other in thirty years. I thanked God, then, that he had sent me home with all my little flock before he called his old servant to his peace.

Just such a God-fearing, dear old man was your father, I can gather from the newspaper account of his life. You and I cannot see, Doctor, why the Lord disposes as He does, but we shall know by and by. Meanwhile, it is ours to watch and work and wait, as you surely are doing and I wish with all my heart I were, that by and by when the call comes to us, too, we may say humbly, yet trustingly, "According to the light that was in me, I shone. I tried to do all I could", and for our manifold shortcomings ask His pardon who is all merciful.

Again, to an acquaintance he wrote telling of his bereavement:

... At present I am like a man who has suddenly lost his background and stands alone in an open desert. I had been away from home these thirty years and never thought that the breaking up of it by the death of my father could so affect me.

³ Collection of Dr. Jane E. Robbins.

But then, he was, as it were, the link between the past and the present for me. He read and criticized what I wrote, and in all I had his backing and support. He taught me English and understood my children. My mother, dearer even as she is to me in one way, simply holds the loadstones of the past. The connection with today is broken, never to be mended. My old home is lost to me as I am today. As a child, in the thought I can still turn back and nestle in my mother's lap—but my father was my manhood's friend.

Here I am writing to you a stranger, what is in my heart. You will forgive me. It is only so short a time since they sent me a lock of my father's white hair. Thank God who put it into my heart to take my children home to him and Mother last summer. . . .⁴

Realizing, nevertheless, that grief would do little good and that he had important work of reform to do, he resumed the tasks of the new year. On January 12th he lectured on the subject of "Need of Playgrounds and Open Spaces" at the Charity Organization Assembly Hall.⁵ Again on February 8th he was one of a number of prominent persons to speak at Cooper Union in behalf of a bill to shorten hours of labor of working-girls,⁶ then pending in the legislature. At his office he wrote letters to the Indianapolis Superintendent of Schools asking for material on truancy and to the New York State Librarian to inquire about the possibilities of getting home libraries for children of the slums. Foremost in his mind, however, was the desire to coöperate with the newly appointed tenement-house commission. This body was authorized by an Act, Chapter 479 of the laws of 1894, to examine the tenement-house question in New York City and report

⁴ Letter printed in New Bedford *Evening Standard*, Aug. 14, 1914 (R. W. Riis collection).

⁵ Information in Russell Sage Library (Riis Papers).

⁶ *Ibid.*

to the next legislature.⁷ The act became a law on May 4th; and on Saturday, May 12, 1894, the Committee held its first meeting, with Richard Watson Gilder as Chairman, Edward Marshall, Secretary, and Cyrus Edson, Roger Foster, Solomon Moses, George B. Post, John P. Schuchman, and William D. H. Washington the other members.

Riis watched the Committee get under way with the greatest interest. They began at once to collect data on existing laws in New York and other states, invited comment through the newspapers, and held consultations with individuals in the community, including a number of the members who had served on the Drexel Committee in 1884, various city officials, and philanthropic societies. Mr. Gilder had great confidence in the contribution Riis had to make and asked him for suggestions. Accordingly, on May 18, 1894, Riis wrote a careful and comprehensive letter⁸ giving concrete suggestions of how to undertake the task:

301 MULBERRY ST.

May 18-94

DEAR MR. GILDER. These few points by way of suggestions, for a starter.

1.) I would have a colored map of *nationalities* made. For the short span of time the committee has to work in, it will present the easiest working plan, I think.

2.) I would select competent men, *one for each tribe* (East Side Jews, Bohemians, Italians, Negroes, etc.) to make as exhaustive a study of them as possible in the limited time, choosing such as had previous acquaintance with them and means of approaching them naturally on the ground of their own homes, as for instance through connection with the existing relief organizations, the College Settlement, Neighbor-

⁷ W. H. Tolman, "Half a Century of Improved Housing Effort," *Yale Review* (Feb. 1897), p. 399; R. U. Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston, 1929), p. 112.

⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder in Gilder Papers (American Academy of Arts and Letters).

hood Guild, etc. I would make it their duty to find out in what way the tenement, which received them here, affects their lives—what it makes of them and how much of a hand it has in making of them what they become. To illustrate: if it is true of the Jew who through eighteen centuries of oppression and tyranny preserved intact in him the patriarchal home ideal, that is the strong sound kernel in the main, that in a single generation in New York's tenements—always the filthiest and darkest and most crowded to be found anywhere—he breaks down; that his daughters become immoral and his sons thieves to an alarming degree—then what share in it had this tenement that does ever and everywhere violence to the home ideal; what had it to do with the moral uprooting of the man?

What sort of a home did he come from to the tenement that robbed him of even that? And had his love of it and the cutting loose from that safe anchor anything to do with the sudden moral turpitude of her people in the first generation in American evil? Or is it just the rebound from oppression, and will by and by settle down to the safe mean level?

What kind and degree of tenement do the different nationalities fall heir to on coming here?

How long do they stay in them? Is the second or third generation found there, as in the case of the Irish? What is it like?

What proportion is the rent of the earnings of the family? Who are the landlords—their own kind or not? What do they eat—how do they live? How early do the boys and girls begin work? These are questions of more importance than they borrow from the mere fact of their relation to the school question. In my opinion half the drunkenness among the poor is due to poor cookery at home. The girl goes to the shop all her young life, never learns any housekeeping duties there; finally marries some young fellow in the shop and makes his life a burden by wrecking his stomach until it craves the stimulant it did not receive in healthy, well-cooked food. The free lunch counter benefits him and the saloon catches the man and his wages.

3.) The brief time allowed suggests taking the list of overcrowded houses, always on file in the Health Department, for

a starting point. Of course that is beginning at the worst end but I presume you want to know the worst.

These houses are chronic offenders. Why? Is it the landlord's fault? the tenant's? or what?

4-) Consult with the Trades Unions, Mr. Gompers perhaps for a start, as to their attitude and possible help in the way of suggestion and facts.

5-) Have the corps of investigators guided by one man of wide scope and of system. I believe the man you had yesterday, Mr. Veiller, to be a good choice. His record from the East Side Relief work is very good.

When you come to hold public meetings, give notice a week before to the witnesses what you want of them, that they may have time to think.

On the line of "municipal" suggestions, as for instance a sanitary wash house and baths, see Mr. Shaw's article on Glasgow as a municipal study in the March Century of 1890.

Sincerely yrs

JACOB A. RIIS

How much credit Riis's suggestions should be given, it is practically impossible to say. Upon reading the report we find numerous passages which seem to answer questions that he raised. But as has been indicated, the Committee did not stop with consulting one person, highly respected though he might be. There is no question but that he helped to carry forward the work of the Committee by his enthusiastic support at their public hearings and by his newspaper stories commending their work.

2

We must pause in the busy round of reforms to go out to Richmond Hill to see the new Riis baby, born on March 4, 1894. This little one, their last, they named Roger William, or "Vivi" and "Billy" for short. The cunning infant was the pet of all the household and Jake Riis at times found him quite distracting. He probably enjoyed

holding this little one in his arms much more than he did composing some difficult passage; but the articles were waiting! On one particular occasion he dryly remarked⁹ that he would have to wait until William Riis had cut his teeth before he could do much creative writing!

Some reference has already been made to Riis's comradeship with his foster-sister, Miss Emma Reinsholm. She was a teacher in Ribe, an understanding and well-informed woman who took a great interest in her pupils long after they had passed from school into their respective callings. She was alert and interested to hear what was going on in America and elsewhere, and she kept Jacob in touch with Danish affairs. She had considerable command of English, and translated some of Riis's works into Danish. When he needed some material for articles from the old town, she helped him to get it. Riis, on his part, found Emma a kind of safety-valve; often, when exasperated over some matter, he could write a long letter to her and unburden his troubles. On July 10, 1894, we find him chatting with her and telling about young Roger William:¹⁰

DEAR SISTER EMMA: Thank you very much for the two letters I have received since father's death and that I have not answered. It is nice of you to write to such a silly boy. I seem to get so little done and there is so much to do. The reason is that the letters for "Nationallidende" are causing me more trouble than anything else. In these I try to analyze the situation as best I can and Danish is at times so difficult for me. It is a shame. But then that is why I write. Otherwise I would completely forget. Yes "Lammet" she is a—brick—I would have said but that does not mean anything in Danish. In America we say she is a brick. That is a good description. This description must have been taken from the (Greek) mother who said that her sons were the walls of Athens. Each son was a stone

⁹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Reinsholm, July 10, 1894 (Dan-America Museum).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

in the wall. Do you remember that story? What I wanted to say was that "Lammet" can write letters. She wrote to Aunt Sofie, the poor soul. She became especially fond of her and often speaks about her, and how sad she was that she never gave any coffee-parties for old Auntie and Mother in our house. Now I hope Auntie is well and can move her belongings back to the cloister knowing that our Lord is not wanting her yet, before she has seen our last baby. Yes, do you know Mrs. Koch is right. Our life is almost like a romance. It only needed the trip home to fulfill it. Our Lord is to be thanked for it all. Since this I have had the feeling that it had all been fulfilled. And in the past year I have been thinking of writing my next or maybe last book about ourselves. But I can not get far enough away from myself to get the right perspective. It is so personal. Do you know what I mean? I could write the story about another but not about myself. You say that our Lord has entirely guided my life. Yes, dear Emma, it did not seem so in the beginning, but it became as you say, and our Lord has given me the understanding to tell others their difficulties. My happy home life seems to be responsible for that. Yes, Pastor Koch's family means more to me at home than anyone. I became very fond of them. I would like to live my old age in Ribe just to be near them. Give my love to Pastor and his wife from me will you, and say that I never think of my old father without thankfulness and in this life of struggle I often think back on the peaceful old man in his black robe with his peaceful face and his simple message which always brought tears to my eyes in church. It seemed to me heaven. Death and damnation seemed so far away from there. I was glad to think that it was Pastor Koch whose friendly hand took the cross which had made us both so happy from my old father's coffin and sent it back to the king. Do you know that since the old man carried the cross—yes now I make you laugh and I must laugh myself too, but I have had the ambition to carry it myself sometime. I never thought of it before I saw the dear old man with it and it is well. It is one of my unattainable ambitions. You see I do not get the opportunity to serve my fatherland here. . . . I have tried to write some serious articles since he [the baby] came on the scene but he must first have his teeth before I can write

again. Until then we must only think of William Riis. Keep well, dear Emma. . . .

3

In the spring of this year, Riis and Mr. Gilder had discussed the possibility of Riis's writing an article on truancy. Mr. Riis's letter is interesting:

301 MULBERRY ST.

July 2, 1894

DEAR MR. GILDER:

By all means call it "The Manufacture of Thieves." I put the truant caption on merely to give the printer a catchword. I never meant it to stay; I am glad you like it. I certainly hope it will wake us up. We need it, Goodness knows. I shall be in tomorrow, if possible, to see about illustrations.

I know you will be sorry to hear of Major Bullard's death. I think no harder blow has fallen upon the Tenement House Commission. I fear we shall never see a Major Bullard again in that important office. To me he was like a wise elder brother whom I loved. I am sadder than I can tell today. Life seems to grow so short these last few years. How happy must you be who can see and feel that the world is growing better for your touch. The saddest of all things must be to go to one's grave with the feeling that in nothing one has been able to soothe or help the world's misery.

Faithfully yrs

JACOB A. RIIS

When Riis's article on truancy was published in the December, 1894, issue of *The Century*, it bore the title of "The Making of Thieves in New York." In it he dealt with the crowded class rooms of the city schools, and quoted figures to show that in the September, 1893, registration period, 1,527 children who sought admission were turned away. Crowds of children unprovided for by proper play and other activities at school were going out to questionable surroundings in the street, he said, and the number of child criminals brought before the Police Courts

was increasing. He believed that the new truancy law, under which the parent was to be fined, would probably not be effective; nor would additional truant officers be able to help. The "hooky boy" and the criminal should be kept apart by means of a truant home, he felt; and he urged the establishment of such an institution, to be administered under the Children's Aid Society and kept free from politics. He also urged vacation drills to supplement the Fresh Air Fund holidays for children.

His desire to see playgrounds established expressed itself in "Playgrounds for City Schools," published in the September, 1894, issue of *The Century*. In this article he told of the bad conditions in some of the city schools, and described the dark playground at Wooster Street, P. S. 10. He pointed out that swarms of rats foraged in the gloomy basements of these old buildings, and that boys and girls had to dodge iron posts and pillars in their play. Lack of playgrounds thrust children on the street, he said; and he urged that the city make some provision for real play places in or near each school, pointing out that under the Small Parks Act of 1887 the Board of Street Opening and Improvement was empowered to condemn lands anywhere below 155th Street and to locate and lay out parks. He decried the red tape in the Mulberry Bend case, showing that seven years had passed since the law took effect, but "the Bend is there instead, in all its pristine nastiness."¹¹ In conclusion he gave a proposed plan of a park¹² for Grammar School 20 at Christy and Forsythe streets and urged that enough land be condemned around every public school in the city to make a playground for children and a breathing place for mothers with babies.

¹¹ J. A. Riis, "Playgrounds for City Schools," *The Century*, Sept., 1894, pp. 657-666.

¹² He credited Dr. Tracy with originating the idea.

Another project in which Riis was interested in 1894 was an attempt to get the public to reduce the sums paid out for flowers at funerals, for he believed that the money could be of great help to the suffering poor. On the one hand he saw expensive caskets covered with fragile blossoms which withered within a few hours. On the other hand he daily encountered the dead wagon with its bleak pine boxes bound for Potter's Field. Many of the poor thus carried away had died for want of proper food to keep them alive. He had come across a plan being used in Europe, which seemed to him feasible. It was known as Good Works Cards. A person wishing to show sympathy for bereaved loved ones could send a card instead of flowers with the message that a sum had been given to a charitable cause "...it is printed in silver, with black borders, and contains with a wreath of oak the words: 'In Memory of ——' the name of the dead filling the blank space. On the back are lines for the name of the society receiving the gift, of its treasurer and of the donor." He wrote a story for the *Evening Sun* under the heading "Good Works Cards" outlining the whole plan.¹³ "Flowers for the Dead to be Replaced by Kind Deeds to the Living. . . . War Upon the Wasteful Fashion Here and Abroad—A Danish Scheme That Has Taken Root in England, France, and Austria and Is Now Proposed Here—Instead of Feeing the Florist, Friends Are Asked to Contribute to a Fund for the Relief of Widows and Orphans. . . ." In Denmark and Sweden, he said, where the plan was in organized shape, the cards could be purchased at stationery- and book-stores from proprietors who sold them without profit at a minimum of one krone—about twenty-seven cents. The purchaser, if he so desired, could pay more. "... For every krone paid he receives a small printed slip

¹³ Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library).

called a control card, that serves as a means of checking off his account with the society on its books." Practical figures accompanied the suggestion that New York adopt a similar system. More than 40,000 funerals occurred in New York each year, he pointed out. Deducting 10 per cent of this number for Potter's Field burials there would still be a sufficient number to raise at least \$9,000 for some charitable society's work if the donors purchased cards at a minimum of twenty-five cents. If as many as five cards were used at each funeral there would be an income of \$40,000, or more, which would be of inestimable aid to the poor.¹⁴

After his article appeared in the *Evening Sun* he had some correspondence with Charles B. Kellogg and Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell of the Charity Organization Society. Their replies follow: ¹⁵

ROCK HARBOR
WESTPORT, N. Y.
Aug. 1894

MY DEAR MR. RIIS:

It seems to me that anything which will stop the waste you speak of will be a blessing and the suggested manner of doing it certainly will prove very attractive to many people.

It would not be a success for the C.O.S. as our funds do not go to the poor people themselves, you know, but in salaries, rents, etc., so there would be a certain lack of sentiment in our appeal which would ensure failure. I should think the King's Daughters could take it up very appropriately, however, and they might start a special fund for the helping of families suffering from a death to which all the contributions noted on the "Good Works Cards" could be paid in.

Hope you and yours are well this hard summer.

Truly yours

J. S. LOWELL
MRS. C. R. LOWELL

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Jacob A. Riis, Esq.

301 Mulberry St.

MY DEAR SIR:—

I have read and thought considerably over your note of the 4th instant with your excellent suggestion about "Good Works Cards," and have also talked the matter over with Mrs. Lowell; and while recognizing the ingenuity and benefits of the scheme, we do not think it is just the thing for the Charity Organization Society to take up. It ought to be done by some society that appeals to the common sentiment because it gives relief, which you know we do not do out of our own funds.

We think that there is no better enterprise to carry out the suggestion than your Tenement House Chapter of the King's Daughters that works right among the people who would probably be influenced the most by it; and I hope they will see their way clear to adopt it.

I have considerable confidence in its success, and expect to see the name of Riis registered among the great inventive benefactors of the age; but in all seriousness, I think very well of it indeed, and hope it will have a cordial trial.

With kindest regards,

Faithfully yours,

CHAS. D. KELLOGG,
Gen'l. Sec'y.

The members of the Lexow Committee had begun to meet in March, 1894, and they continued until December of that year. In all they took some 10,576 pages of testimony, issued 3,000 subpoenas, and heard 678 witnesses.¹⁸ Among other disclosures they unearthed the information that street-walkers and disorderly houses were operating with the assistance of the police captains. Wardsmen and the political boss of the district exacted a toll from every one during visits. Each disorderly house paid an "initiation fee" of \$500 to every police captain coming into the district, and in addition to that the regular fee of \$50 a

¹⁸ *Investigation of the Police Department of the City of New York* (5 vols.), proceedings from March 9, 1894, to Dec. 29, 1894 (Albany).

month plus a neat sum for a "Christmas present" for the captain. The scandals, traced to the heads of departments and to political leaders, brought about dozens of indictments. Scores of suggestions were offered for a revision in police policy. E. L. Godkin, editor of the *Evening Post* and of *The Nation*, urged that the Police Department be placed under the control of a single commissioner instead of leaving it in the hands of the ineffectual board of four then existing. But in the end the four-man system remained.

With such startling revelations as had been made by the Lexow Committee hopeful citizens waited for results. Weeks went by. A slow-moving and half-hearted legislature eventually passed acts to provide for new inferior courts, to reform the police-court bench, and to reorganize the public-school system.

Most interesting to the citizens of New York was the effect of the Lexow investigation on city politics.¹⁷ The mayoralty campaign was approaching in the fall of 1894. Upright men in both the great parties decided to join forces to bring about reform. They called a meeting at Madison Square Garden and chose a committee of seventy to conduct their campaign. They selected William M. Strong, a successful citizen of high character as their candidate for Mayor and John W. Goff, Counsel for the Lexow Committee, to run for Recorder. Reform publicity swept the town. Tammany must go. The disgraceful revelations of the Lexow investigation were used on every hand to convince the voters of the need for change. Strong and Goff were elected by a majority of over 45,000.

Reformers like Riis went about in a state of happy excitement. The city would now experience a purging; the

¹⁷ New York newspapers of the day (see bibliography). C. H. Parkhurst, *My Forty Years in New York* (New York, 1923), pp. 106-145.

awful load of individual struggle would be lightened by support from the voting public in general and the new municipal officers in particular. Had not William M. Strong and the Committee of Seventy promised? Strong would do what he could if They, meaning deposed Tammany, could be kept out.

Indeed, as time went on during the next three years, Riis and his colleagues were to find their hopes more than realized. Mayor Strong meant what he said when he accepted the challenge to clean up the city. During the first year he was eminently successful because he had wide support from many who remembered the scandals exposed a few months before. However, he was a little too eager to please certain politicians, and after the first year in office truckled to them to some extent, to the detriment of his program.¹⁸ In justice to him, nevertheless, it must be said that his administration brought a wonderful change in New York affairs. Police courts were reorganized and the best magistrates available were put in. Fourteen new school buildings were erected and the pay of teachers was increased. Bridges were built over the Harlem River; city parks under Colonel Waring's supervision were kept clean. Support was given to the recommendations of the Gilder Tenement House Commission for more playgrounds and the clearance of slums. In short, it was a kind of municipal regeneration which merited the praise that reformers bestowed.

Cheered by the 1894 election results the Committee on Vagrants of the Conference of Charities took new hope. The incoming reform administration would surely help to solve the problem of the homeless. But some months

¹⁸ *New York Times*, June 4, 1895; *The World*, June 4, 1895 (Dr. Parkhurst's speech at Good Government Club *A* dinner).

were to elapse before the new officers could organize their work and take an aggressive stand. In December, 1894, this Committee secured the adoption of a plan to send homeless men applying for relief to the Department of Public Charities and Correction. This step resulted in a large increase in the number of casual lodgers asking for shelter during the winter of 1894-95. The city continued to use the police lodgings, but also provided small lodging-rooms in the basement of Bellevue Hospital. When the latter quarters became full, the overflow was sent to the Dock House situated at the foot of East 26th Street. No accurate record of the lodgers was kept, nor was any effort made to investigate their needs. They slept on the floor, and sometimes the rooms were so crowded that there was not space to lie full length. The Committee on Vagrants complained of these conditions, pointing to the great increase in applicants—from about 819 in December, 1894, to 3,195 in March, 1895. They urged the establishment of an adequate municipal shelter, and, as we shall see, won their point within another year.

CHAPTER IX

Home Life in the 1890's

RIIS expected some day to write a book about his children. Unfortunately this plan was never carried out. He did, however, keep a file of notes about them; ¹ some of them give us interesting glimpses of the family life:

Play

Mama objects to the children occupying the whole upper house for their play.

Trial of the marble—Kate has it, John claims it. Papa adjudicates “Does the marble belong to you, John?” “Yes.” Kate bursts into tears. Eddie and Clara give evidence. Career of marble traced back, etc.—Kate triumphs. John goes away mad with Harry Lee and cries—Mama sends both to bed.

Kate's Business Card

I am a doker and a tuth puller & hiar cutta
2 cents for one tuth pulled
10 “ hiar cut
2 room 1 floor
Curls cut, pulled, briaded

Mama

Says when the cat comes to see the children in the morning he even “makes himself short from 'sheer affection.”

John

John introduced his friend “Fishy Joe” to Mama and secures lunch for him.

¹ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

Elsewhere in the notes are some humorous stories of the half-grown Clara and her activities:

Clara

Carries on a constant correspondence with advertising firm in Lynn, Mass. Received for Stamps all manner of things. Recently "Palestine's wonder-stone, nature's everlasting perfume, emitting an odor as sweet as all the other world's perfumes combined and also a catarrh remedy! Thinks herself well paid for her correspondence, although she has no catarrh.

Deportment in School 95, what's the matter "I should think 5% of fun in a month is not much."

Keeps pollywogs in her room in a bowl with stones and shells in. One of them gets hurt. Katie exclaims: "Oh, Clara, the little baby one is crushed as flat as a pancake under this big rock." Great mourning over the accident. The children refuse to go to bed, want to "wake" it. Clara indignant.

She gives one to May Babcock who brings it home with a couple of shells and a stone. Her mother wrathful. "No indeed, I'm not going to have any Pollywogs flopping around over the house." "But Mama, I'll keep it in my own room."

Ed, their oldest, a rather quiet youth, came in for his share of joking: "...the medicine crank always carries a bottle of soap liniment bought of a peddler or creosote for his teeth," and, "Has been lectured on his duty to defend his smaller brother. (Does it beat Harry Lee)"² About young Katie there were many incidents. This little miss with her big family of cats was always uttering some droll remark, to the great amusement of her father:

Kate

Whispers to her Mama "I think Papa is peevish." That is what Mama says when she is cross. Another time when cor-

² *Ibid.*

rected announces suddenly at table "Papa, you are as cross as a bear."

Comments upon the death of Peter, the cat, "Jim is *the only* cat that lasts."

Has a fit of anger and is very bad. Says to her Mother "I guess I know the devil better than you do." "She even boasts of the acquaintance," says her mother.

Apologizes when the turmoil of the children has made Mama impatient. "You see I am around here a good deal, but I can't help it. My school don't keep all day."

To her Papa—"You had better not be so sassy, you don't own this house alone."

Johnny, "Oh, yes he does."

Katie, "No, he don't. God owns it too."

To her Mother—"Never mind, we are all God's family, you and Papa and all." ³

On another occasion he wrote these very human little notes about Mrs. Riis and John: ⁴

Mama

At Christmas I speak of the sadness that attends the passing of the year because of its lost opportunities. She says "I think it is nice there is another to make up for it in."

She hopes John won't be as dirty in the face in the New Year as he is then. Johnny "I don't know if I washed it to-day but I will in the New Year."

John

JOHN'S WARNING

"Any one who comes in this gate who dose not close it they must go back and close it after themsafts and the other gate

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

to. I shall tie the gate to so you must go in the other gate, now.

Jake Riis would tell his children "marvelous and remarkable stories" in those happy days. His daughter, Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre, writes: "I used to listen, in rapt attention, as he drew the stories out of his imagination and continued them from evening to evening. As they progressed, they grew more and more remarkable and fantastic. They were usually about animals, some of them weird creatures of his imagination, and others, just the animals we know but who did the most unheard of things. . . ." ⁵

The Yule [writes Mrs. Owre] was always a glorious time in our house. . . . There was always the Christmas Eve dinner with roast goose, stuffed with apples and prunes, the delicious Danish "apple-cake" my Mother made, covered with whipped cream and dotted over with currant jelly and the *risingrød*, the traditional Danish dish that is made of rice cooked in milk, and seasoned well with butter, salt and cinnamon sticks. Somewhere in that bowl of *risingrød*, lay buried one, just one, almond. Lucky indeed was the one who got the coveted almond in his portion, for he got a prize! Then came the tree, and the singing of Christmas hymns, both our own and the Danish hymns they loved so well. Mother, who was a talented musician, played on the little Danish piano, while the rest of us sang, and Father accompanied with his "Dee-Dee" for he thought, at least, that he could not carry a tune. . . . When the celebration was at its height, we usually took the "snappers" from the tree . . . and tore out the paper caps hidden within. Then a parade began and we all marched around the tree.⁶

In the same letter the daughter Kate writes:

. . . One Christmas in the long ago, when we had all finally gone up to bed, Father stayed below to enjoy to the last the beautiful Christmas Eve that was fast becoming a memory.

⁵ Letter from Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre to writer, Dec. 6, 1934.

⁶ *Ibid.*

A little box of some Danish candy had been sent from the old country, and Father, who delighted in sweets, sat reading beneath the tree, occasionally taking a piece of candy. Suddenly he awoke to the realization that he had eaten it *all*, and then his conscience began to prick. Sheepishly he turned the box over to see just whom the candy had been sent to, anyhow, and great was his relief when he found it was addressed to himself! It was for long a source of amusement in the family.

Mrs. Riis possessed a deeply spiritual nature, and had a serene confidence in the guidance of a Higher Power. Her quiet way of handling the youngsters is seen in this incident:

...I have a picture of Mother soothing me, when, as a small girl, I became much frightened over the idea, which some silly playmate had imparted to me, that the world was coming to an end *that* night! The feeling of reassurance that came over me when she took me out into the garden and bade me look up at the star-lit sky, so still and so peaceful, and then asked me gently if I thought anything awful could happen on such a night...⁷

Jake Riis's attitude toward animals was always kindly. Although he had overcome an early repugnance for hunting, he could never shoot a deer—there was something, he said, in those lovely eyes that reminded him of his wife. He enjoyed the birds that sang in the garden at his Long Island home, and hoped that some day the starlings from Denmark would come and find him there. When it came to domestic pets, he was often at a loss to accommodate all the new ones that found their way into the house. His daughter Kate wrote later: ⁸

...Father was so tender-hearted that it was utterly impossible for him to injure or hurt any living thing. When the place on Long Island was over-run by my cats and their kittens, of which I had whole armies, he could not drown those

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

unwanted kittens, nor could he tell me, his tiny daughter, that I must part with my pets. Instead, he would take a walk late at night, with my oldest brother going along, and each one would tuck a kitten under an arm. When they came to some house where he thought the kitten would be taken in and cared for kindly, they left one on the doorstep! I never knew till years later why my kittens kept disappearing so mysteriously.

And well do I remember when we finally caught a rat in our barn that had been bothering us, Father simply could not immerse the cage in water. It was beyond him, so he, Bill and I took a walk over the fields and through the woods till we came to a big tree that had an owl's nest in it. There, he released the rat, hoping sincerely that the owl would find it and make short work of it thus doing what he himself could not do! Those are the only two times I ever knew him to side step an unpleasant task. . . .

Some idea of the pet ménage in the Riis home may be gained from the following list made by Jake Riis: ⁹

Household Pets

Olivia, the cow—not much of a pet.

Jim, the cat.

The dog.

....

The blizzard cat with a broken tail

The kid and the nursery bottles

11 hens 1 rooster

12 pigeons

1 pigeon who thinks she is a hen
and roosts with the chickens.

The rabbits—dug out and ran away,

John seeking them ever since

The beautiful duck

The Canary bird

The So. Amer. bird.

Lofty toads & lightning bugs

Rosebugs—they are bad.

⁹ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

Riis's kindness was not confined to his own home. He showed consideration for his neighbors, though there were occasional small disputes over chickens and the pets. On one occasion the son of a well-to-do family in the community was under suspicion in a murder case. One day a newsboy came crying an "extra" telling of a "new development" in the case. Jacob Riis

...rushed out on the street and explained to the boy that the family of the... man lived near us and that he was *not* to go in that direction for his mother would hear the news cries and be distressed. The newsboy apparently agreed to his appeal, but Father watched him and soon saw him steering lustily in the forbidden way. It did not take Father long to catch up with him, and taking him by the collar, he turned him about, and in no uncertain language laid down the law to him. And he went, then, away from... the house where the sorrowing mother dwelt...¹⁰

The trait which expressed itself so dominantly in his home as well as in his work was his great optimism. His letter to his sister Emma written on January 1, 1895, expresses this cheer.¹¹

Happy New Year dear Sister Emmal All happiness for 1895. I wish I were rich so I could give you 500 Kr. for your Institute instead of the five that I enclose in this letter which is not even for the Institute but for something I wish you would buy for me. I do not wish to be rich and it is just as well because I never will be, thank Heaven. I do not have time to save.... I don't think you realize what a big boy I now am. You would have laughed if you had seen me sneaking down and riding on the rocking horse when I ought to have been writing. Well I did! At times I get tired of writing and then the nearest... attracts my attention. Can you imagine what the other committee members, with whom I am discussing

¹⁰ Letter from Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre to writer, Dec. 6, 1934.

¹¹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Emma Reinsholm (Dan-America Museum).

plans for parks in the slums to cost 4 or 5 million dollars of the city's money would say if they had seen me. A seven year old law provides for these parks but this has never been enforced. Now, we got tired of the old directors and have a new committee of 70 "wise" citizens who are trying to bring about as many improvements as possible. They have elected me to the committee in charge of the parks and playgrounds and at last it seems as though I shall win my fight. Luckily, they know nothing about the rocking horse!!! or Mother or Sofie. Tell them that I received their letter and thank them very much. I shall write shortly. Poor Aunt Sofie in the cloister, God bless her, the good soul. I wish I could change the iron rules enabling her to have the benefit of her money instead of leaving it to the cloister after her death, and then her mind would be at rest. Do tell her that she will live long enough to see me once again as I am not so easily gotten rid of. But about the 5 Krone I wish you would first buy me one of the beautiful family pictures that Bodil Hauschildt took of us in Ogmundsen's garden. Secondly, two pictures, one called "Girls from South Jutland," the other "The Last on the Mound." Two verses by Vilhelm Bergoe are inscribed under each. Do you know them? I should like to have them. If the price is more than one Krone apiece I shall send you the balance. I believe the family picture is 3 Kroner so the five would cover everything. Will you do this for me? Please mail the 3 pieces together, well wrapped, they are broken so easily. Many, many thanks. . . .

I enclose 3 pictures that I have of Father. I have two pictures of the last and biggest so Mother may keep this one. Ask her which she prefers to have enlarged and I can have it done free here and better than in Denmark.

Remember me to Dean Koch and Mrs. Koch as well as all the other friends. I have often thought of them these last few days as I have been humming the old Christmas hymns. They become dearer the further away from home one is and the older one grows. . . . We, of course, had a Christmas tree and the children were delighted. For this occasion Katie counted my hair "towards East." This is one of the advantages of living in the country the children get a good sense of locality so they can comb the hair to East or to West as they wish,

the dear children; they are young but once. I have also been thinking of Gjern's and their little daughter who is with Our Lord. She has had a real Christmas, don't you think. Tell them I share their sorrow and how fond I became of them the little we saw of each other. Dear Emma, this I need not tell you as we are brother and sister. May God be with you all. Again wishing you a Happy New Year.

YOUR BROTHER JACOB

Lincoln Steffens has given us some vivid accounts of his connections with Riis at 301 Mulberry Street. In his autobiography he describes Jake as "a lusty Danish emigrant, with a vigorous body and undisciplined mind that grasps facts as he himself sees them, an imagination to reconstruct, emotion to suffer, and a kind, fighting spirit to weep, whoop, laugh, and demand. . . ." He describes the initial visit that he made with Riis to Police Headquarters across the street. ". . . He broke into all offices, police and health, walked right in upon everybody he thought I should know, laughed, made them all laugh. . . ." ¹²

Steffens was often puzzled by Riis's indifference to money matters and would remonstrate with him. Riis was then giving lectures free, or for ten, twenty-five, or fifty dollars, and writing articles for about the same prices. He was indifferent to the sums offered him. With a growing family it was hard for him to make ends meet, and Steffens told him he ought to charge more; otherwise he might die and his friends might forget. Whereupon Riis told his adviser to get out of the office. ¹³

On one occasion they were arguing about money matters. It seemed that young Ed Riis needed an overcoat but there was no money for one in the family purse. Steffens

¹² L. Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York, 1931, 2 vols), Vol. I, pp. 204-259; L. Steffens, "Jacob A. Riis, Reporter, Reformer, American Citizen," *McClure's*, XXI (Aug. 1903), pp. 419-425.

¹³ *Ibid.*

was berating Jake for his lack of practical sense when the mail arrived. Riis opened a letter and a check fell out. Some man down in the South had sent pay for an advertisement which Jake had written years before. Riis looked at the check and then roared his jolly laugh. Providence had taken care of him!

Steffens described Riis's life as one long stretch of emotional excitement; but, he added, "A natural shrewdness kept his sentimentality within bounds." This shrewdness, said Steffens, enabled him to get action from the city administration; while he preached, "he pulled wires." When he saw that something needed to be done, he would call a committee and then start the committee to resolution-making!¹⁴

The reporter Steffens marveled at Riis's romantic worship of women. In spite of encountering the dregs of humanity while on his rounds, he always maintained that there was fundamental good in every poor wretch. He seems never to have been disillusioned.¹⁴

Jake Riis was unable to keep complete track of his personal expenditures. If he met a beggar on the street, he would put his hand into his pocket and pull out whatever money he had. He also helped needy friends who came to his office. Steffens often tried to persuade him to be more businesslike, and on January 1, 1895, he began to keep a book of personal expenditures.¹⁵ The book began with the foreword:

This account of receipts and expenses was opened on January 1st, 1895, so that I might find out where my money goes, and how much of it I get anyhow. We shall see. The receipts are in the back of the book.

Jacob A. Riis
Jan. 1st, 1895

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

A few excerpts from these accounts will give the reader an idea of Riis's mode of life at this period, and will also serve to indicate the scale of prices which then prevailed:

Jan. 1.	For this book	.05
"	Commutation self & Eddie	9.95
"	R.R. fare	.25
"	New Years to letter carrier	1.00
"	Eddie week's fares	1.00
"	The Sun	.02
"	El. R. R. fares	.15
"	Cigar	. 5
"	Lunch	.15
"	Weekly pay to local police	.50
"	Lam for household	22.40
Jan. 2.	Two other letter carriers	2.00
"	fares	.10
"	A new hat	3.00
"	" " cap	2.00
"	newspaper	.01
"	lunch	.10
"	5 Krone (order) for home	1.37
"	Messenger for getting it	.13
"	Newspaper & Fare	. 7
"	Van Wieklen Coal and Wood	13.00
"	Lammet extra	2.00
"	Cigar	. 5
.		
Jan. 6.	Sundries to square acct.	.29
	Receipts of week	\$66.48
	Expenses	62.64
		<hr/>
	On hand	\$ 3.84

Expenditures on January 17th to 19th included: 60¢ "to get specs fixed"; 60¢ for a "nigger doll baby"; \$2.00 for a "Flexible flyer sled"; \$1.00 for the *Ladies' Home Journal*, \$1.34 for skates for John, and .08 for chocolate for John, and the large sum of \$2.89 for "clothes" for the same

young man. By January 28th he was in difficulties. The account would not balance and he wrote "This was where I got left, I lost the track and had to square the thing best way I could. Anyhow, this is a bore. . . ." But by the next day he had recovered his spirits and made an entry. "Now we make a fresh start! Here she goes." By February 25th he was again in trouble; and he commented in the journal:

... On hand \$11.00. This is a big fraud for I have \$20; but there seems to be no finding out where the other \$9.00 came from. This is mighty queer business anyhow. Now, because the book says so, I am supposed to have only \$11. which isn't so. But then, the other day, I lacked nine or eleven dollars. I suppose that is what they call balancing books! Sometime or other a new blunder offsets the old and things come out even. Here she goes! ¹⁶

On May 10th, which was bill-paying day, he wrote:

... The Lamb and I had both a hard time of it. Poor Lamb! She thinks I am harsh when I merely want to save her from the fatuous belief that she can overtake old bills—it is like an enemy invading a country and leaving himself at the mercy of it by letting its fortresses stand unmolested in its rear. She is so anxious to not worry me with money matters that she takes chances full of infinite future worry for herself. Poor Lamb! Well, I won't allow it. But what a dear, sweet Lamb she is anyhow! ¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER X

The "Golden Age" in Mulberry Street

I

THE Gilder Commission had continued its investigation over a period of months,¹ and on January 16, 1895, it submitted a final report to the legislature, recommending, among other things, that the more congested slum areas be eliminated and that small parks be established in their place. The Commission² also recommended that in the future no school-house be erected without provision for an outdoor playground. Upon receipt of the findings the legislature considered action and in the course of the year 1895 passed several laws (Chapters 69, 293, 911)³ directing the Board of Street Opening to complete the parks already laid out and to create others. They were to complete the project within three years, and for the purpose a sum of about five million dollars was appropriated. It began to look as though Riis's hopes for playgrounds would be realized.

Meanwhile, in the early part of this year, he continued to serve on the Committee on Vagrancy and helped draw up a petition which the group sent to the Mayor on April 23, 1895:

In view of this offer [to supply tickets for lodgings at the Wayfarers' Lodge for exceptional cases] of the Charity Organ-

¹ R. U. Johnson, *Remembered Yesterdays* (Boston, 1929), p. 112.

² *Report of Tenement House Committee to Legislature*, Jan. 16, 1895.

³ Section 5, Ch. 567, Laws of 1895, known as the Tenement House Act (Folder in Gilder Papers, American Academy of Arts and Letters).

ization Society, we hope that the City Lodging House will be closed from June 1st to Oct. 1st and that the Police Lodging Rooms will never again be opened.

The committee would also ask your Honorable Board to consider the importance of providing some institution for the training in industry and habits of steady work of the large numbers of young and middle-age vagrants who are growing up in the City, and we would respectfully suggest that a Farm School on Long Island (where they could be sent instead of going to the workhouse as at present, and where they could be taught country work) would be the best means of helping them to escape the degrading, wandering life they are adopting.

The petition was signed by Josephine Shaw Lowell, as Chairman, Rosalie Butler, R. R. McBurney, John A. McKim, Charlotte Lindley Couper, Thomas M. Mulry, Wm. H. Tolman, Homer Folks, and Jacob A. Riis.⁴

Two days later Riis and Richard Watson Gilder and others appeared before Mayor Strong in behalf of a bill for the improvement of tenement- and lodging-houses.

On May 6, 1895, Riis's friend Theodore Roosevelt came to Mulberry Street to serve as President of the Police Commission.⁵ He had promised Mayor Strong that he would clean up the corruption in the Police Department. Since he was also an ex-officio member of the Health Board, he would have additional power to bring about reform. That was indeed a happy moment when the new president and his three colleagues took up their duties at Headquarters. Jake wouldn't have missed the occasion for a million dollars! ⁶ The Golden Age had come!

During the first few days of the new commissioners'

⁴ Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library, MSS.).

⁵ The other commissioners were: Andrew D. Parker, Avery D. Andrews, and Frederick D. Grant. New York *Daily Tribune*, May 7, 1895; scrap-book of clippings from New York papers, 1895 (Roosevelt Library).

⁶ J. A. Riis, "Police Commissioner Roosevelt," *The Outlook*, June 22, 1895.

work, all went well. They seemed to be at one in their desire for reform. Word got around that there would soon be a wholesale clean-up, and that new blood would be injected into the system. Superintendent Byrnes, veteran detective, was likely to go, because his name was closely identified with the previous régime.⁷

Roosevelt wanted to have facts at first hand about the members of the force and decided he would make a midnight tour of certain districts. Going to the window in his second-floor office he yelled across the way to Riis to come over—he wanted to talk to him. Jake sprinted up the stairs, and soon the two friends were mapping out a plan for a visit of inspection.

The plan was put into effect a few nights later.⁸ On June 7, 1895, Roosevelt went to the Union League Club for dinner; later in the evening he changed his clothes and joined Riis, who was waiting for him outside the building. At two-thirty in the morning, they were heading downtown from 42nd Street along First and Third Avenues and over to Bellevue Hospital. As Roosevelt had feared, they found an amazing laxity among the officers who were supposed to be patrolling the district. Hardly a single one was doing his duty; one or two were asleep on the job. The next day's newspapers were full of the story of the midnight trip; scared policemen quaked in their boots, waiting for the summons to headquarters. They had cause to fear, for Roosevelt and his colleagues meant business.⁹

As time passed, the Police Department took on a new air of efficiency. But the harmony of the first few days began to disappear when the commissioners differed on procedure. Politics could not be kept out. The numerous critics

⁷ *The World*, May 25, 1895.

⁸ *New York Times*, June 8, 1895; *New York Herald*, June 8, 1895; *The World*, June 8, 1895; *New York Journal*, June 8, 1895.

⁹ *New York Times*, July 25, 1895.

of Roosevelt's drastic discharge of incompetent men began to dub him "Haroun-Al-Roosevelt" and do all they could to cook up complaints. Riis watched the activities of his friend with the greatest interest and defended him against every criticism. He wrote ¹⁰ of "Haroun-Al's" courage, showing how in four weeks the new board had impressed its high aims upon a demoralized force. One night he went to Clarendon Hall with Roosevelt, who had been called there in reference to a labor controversy. As the meeting progressed, he watched his hero responding to the demands of the crowd with directness and reason. "I was never so proud and pleased as when they applauded him to the echo. . . ."

Roosevelt and Riis had been making their nightly tours for some time. Early one morning they came to the Church Street station. They entered, and found a sergeant glancing over his blotter. Passing by him they went down the cellar steps to the men's lodging-room. There they found conditions much as they were on the night in 1870 when young Riis had slept there. This night three men lay stretched on the planks; two of them were youths fresh from the country.

While Riis stood there, he told Roosevelt his story, and Roosevelt turned red with anger as he listened:

"Did they do that to you?" he asked when I had ended. For an answer I pointed to the young lads then asleep before him.

"I was like this one," I said.

He struck his clenched fists together. "I will smash them tomorrow." ¹¹

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1895, the Conference of Charities had recommended to the Board of Estimate and

¹⁰ *The Outlook*, June 22, 1895.

¹¹ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901), pp. 258-259. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

Apportionment that a sum be granted for the establishment of a lodging-house for homeless men. As a result the city authorities had set aside \$10,000 for the purpose.¹² On February 15, 1896, by Roosevelt's order, the police lodgings were closed forever. On March 11th the barge in the East River was opened pending the conditioning of a building to be used as a municipal shelter, and at last the city was ready to undertake a more scientific care of her transients.¹³ During the ten years from 1885 to 1895 a total of 1,388,922 persons—men and women—had slept in the station lodgings.¹⁴ Some better form of treatment would now be given. To Riis, who served on the Committee on Vagrancy and induced Roosevelt to close the lodgings, much of the credit is due.

If Mulberry Street had meant adventure before, it became doubly exciting now that Roosevelt was there. Jake initiated his friend into the life of the district. They ate a meal at a restaurant frequented by some of its notorious criminals, and Jake pointed out these characters by name. They continued to inspect the tenements and dropped in at the welfare organizations in that section of town. One evening Jake had the pleasure of introducing Roosevelt to Miss Wald and the other workers at the Henry Street Settlement;¹⁵ this was the first of a series of happy occasions when the two men, arm in arm, and singing a jolly song about a Scandinavian, strode down the street toward the Settlement.

Their comradeship was not confined to the slum district, or to week-days and business hours. Riis visited in

¹² Copy of letter written by Chief of Police Conlin to Board at Riis's suggestion (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

¹³ Letters from members of Vagrancy Committee to Commander Booth-Tucker, Sept. 30, 1896; letters from Mrs. J. S. Lowell to Riis, May 15, 1896 (Russell Sage Library).

¹⁴ Reports of the Police Department, 1886-96.

¹⁵ Interview with Miss Lillian D. Wald.

the Roosevelt home and vice versa.¹⁶ They discussed all kinds of social problems, and they usually thought alike on the important issues.¹⁷ Roosevelt wanted Riis to accept some office in the Mayor's advisory group; but Jake would not consider a political appointment. He was content to stay where he was, especially now that his friend was in office across the way.

2

Thus while enjoying every minute of the reform administration, Riis took new inspiration for his attacks on the tenement. Since so many of his efforts had for years been in behalf of Mulberry Bend, we shall here briefly review developments in that section.¹⁸ It will be remembered that the Drexel Committee in 1884, under Dr. Felix Adler's able chairmanship, advised the regulation of tenements and recommended the construction of playgrounds. Three years later, during Mayor Hewitt's administration, the legislature adopted a measure known as the Small Parks Act of 1887. This act authorized the establishment of play spaces for the more congested areas of the city and provided an expenditure of \$1,000,000 a year for the purpose with the express condition that the appropriation was not to be cumulative. In 1888 plans were filed for the demolition of Mulberry Bend, but it took the city more than four years to get a report of the expected cost. Then it was found that clearance and construction would

¹⁶ T. Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt, an Autobiography*, p. 187; J. B. Bishop, *Theodore Roosevelt and His Time* (New York, 1920), Vol. I, p. 67; T. Roosevelt, "Jacob Riis," *The Outlook*, CVII (June 6, 1914), p. 284.

¹⁷ Pamphlet with speech delivered by Roosevelt at the New York Preachers' Meeting, Jan. 21, 1896, in which he referred to Riis as "that best of our social students..." and said Riis had called his attention to the evils of the liquor traffic (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

¹⁸ Citizen's Union Pamphlet, No. 6, "Small Parks and Recreation Piers for the People" (Oct., 1897).

cost more than a million and a half, and special action would have to be taken to get the additional amount. In 1894 the city finally took possession and became landlord of the filthy old barracks. Months went by during which the tenants either paid rent to the city instead of to private landlords or refused to pay at all. In the meantime reformers had done everything they could to bring action. At last the order was given for the razing of the buildings, and probably no words that Riis ever wrote gave him more satisfaction than the following, printed in the *Evening Sun* on May 25, 1895: ¹⁹

GOODBY TO THE BEND

GETTING READY TO RAZE THE OLD MULBERRY STREET SLUM

ITS HISTORY OF BLOODSHED

*The Last of the Mulberry
Grove That Gave the Bend
Its Name Still Stands*

The days of the old Mulberry Bend are numbered at last. The Mulberry Park will take its place shortly. The Park Department has given notice that it will not renew existing leases after June, and that then the motley crowd now peopling the block between Mulberry, Baxter, Park and Bayard Streets must get ready to move. The necessary advertising and other legal preparations for the sale of the old houses will take perhaps a month or two, and by the end of the summer the work of tearing them down can begin.

Then the eight years' struggle for the abolition of the worst slum of old New York will be over.

It was time. Nobody will regret its going except the Italian ragpickers now in possession, the tramps that haven't migrated yet, and a few, a very few, of the old Irish stock. . . .

¹⁹ A signed story.



Courtesy of Mr. Roger William Riis

MULBERRY STREET IN THE EARLY DAYS



Brown Brothers

AN EARLY PICTURE OF MULBERRY BEND PARK

He followed this story with an article in the *Review of Reviews* for August, 1895, "The Clearing of Mulberry Bend," in which he reviewed the history of this slum and showed that it was in many ways typical of tenement districts everywhere. He showed the evils of absentee landlordism, pointing out that much of the property in the Bend was held by wealthy owners who collected enormous rents by proxy. Likewise he scored the exploitation of cheap labor in this district. He decried the delay in wiping out the Bend and urged that the "poison" of the slum be destroyed. "...Wickedness and vice gravitate toward it and are tenfold exaggerated...its poverty is hopeless... recovery is impossible under its blight." Accompanying his article was a map of the Bend. The article contained a ringing plea for the building of playgrounds, the lighting of dark halls, the regulation by statute of the sweat-shops and of child labor, and the adequate training of children.

In this same year, 1895, the city finally gave orders for the clearing of the Bend,²⁰ and the dramatic day came when the razers set to work to tear down the buildings. But even after the lots stood empty, no immediate action was taken to make a park. Gaping cellars filled with dirty water and stench were allowed to stand, a menace to the health of the surrounding neighborhood. Push-cart men and peddlers rolled their carts and wagons up to the verge of the yawning holes and left them there, so that young children playing in and around them were in constant danger of death. Every day as Riis passed by the spot he was incensed at the delay, and finally he drew up a complaint charging that the state of the Bend was "detrimental to health and dangerous to life," and formally arraigned

²⁰ The Bend cost the city in round numbers a million and a half dollars (forty-one lots were purchased). A total of 956 deaths had occurred in four years in buildings on the property, Riis pointed out. (J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 347.)

the city before the Health Board.²¹ Hardly had he taken this drastic measure when an accident occurred on the cleared lots. Some boys playing with a truck ran it into a cellar hole and were crushed, and at last the city acted. Nearly two years were to go by before the park was officially opened—but that is another story.

Other tenement neighborhoods were attacked. Roosevelt's connection with the Police Board opened up a wonderful opportunity to get results. Riis supplied his friend with a list of the worst buildings, among them sixteen rear dwellings.²² Orders were given for condemning and wrecking. Needless to say, landlords rose up in arms and filed suits; Roosevelt was personally sued. Within a little more than a year after Roosevelt came to Police Headquarters ninety-four of the old fire-traps stood empty.²³ Among them went the loathsome Mott Street barracks²⁴ and Gotham Court, most notorious houses of the Fourth Ward. During the months of battle Riis enjoyed life to the full; Health Departments were a little chagrined at the invectives hurled against them by the landlords, but they did not seem to blame Riis for having helped bring on the trouble.²⁵ It was the beginning of victory—Jake said he was getting fat, he was so happy.

All this struggle in public life did not take him far away from his family. It was his custom to send Mrs. Riis and the children away for the hottest weeks each summer. In the summer of 1895 they went, as they had often done before, to a moderate-priced boarding-house at Becket,

²¹ J. A. Riis, *A Ten Years' War* (Boston, 1900), p. 179; J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 280. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

²² J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 347.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 347-351.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Interview with Mr. Lawrence Veiller, Oct. 6, 1933.

Massachusetts, and through the long weeks of separation Jake looked forward to joining them there. On August 2nd he joyously packed his bag, and, with his pockets stuffed full of candy for the youngsters, was on his way. He found the children as droll as ever. Katie made one day a momentous discovery: "God can paint good, can't he, Mama?" and John transacted formal business with his father as follows: ²⁶

DEAR PAPA: You owe me 19 cents. Mama says if she was me she would ask you for the money to-night. Please give it to me so I can keep it till I need it.

Yours truly, JOHN RIIS

On September 2nd the family returned to Richmond Hill. On October 1st he took his wife for a little vacation journey to the Berkshire Hills where they stayed until October 5th. Mrs. Riis loved the region and hoped that some day they might find a small home there. Evidently pecuniary calculations burdened him when he returned from this trip. He could not balance his accounts, so wrote in the journal "...always something on hand that isn't there. How true that there are three kinds of lies in the world: white lies, black lies and statistics. This is a kind of statistics. Well, anyhow!" ²⁷

The last days of December, 1895, found him laboring over an almost incredibly full round of duties. He attended committee meetings, did his work for the *Evening Sun*, wrote articles for magazines, and lectured on numerous occasions. But he was enjoying it all. He was referred to by one newspaper as a magnetic speaker who gives "a dramatic as well as an accurate representation of the facts with which he deals, and has that enthusiasm which is the result of knowledge and imagination surcharged with

²⁶ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

feeling, and which makes him one of the most convincing and uplifting platform forces within or around the metropolis.”²⁸

At home in the comfortable friendly house, it was supper time, and the big family gathered around the simply laid table. Danish dishes, piping hot, were brought in by the servant girl. All bowed their heads for Grace; then after a moment's silence they were chattering happily over the day's happenings. Mother and Father launched into one of their stories, oft repeated, and one little Riis nudged another knowingly.²⁹ A neighbor's boy appeared at the back door, and John let him in to share the meal.

Jacob Riis exchanged smiles with Mrs. Riis over Katie's latest incidents with the cats and chuckled over the stories about the baby, Vivi. When the meal was over and the children had gone upstairs, Jake sat down in his chair before the fire, lighted a cigar and took out his account-book. He made the following entry: ³⁰

Took in \$3458.60 in 1895. Gosh, what a lot of money. Where did it all go to? So then at the end of year at the age of 46, I spend \$3500 a year, all I earn, have a house with a mortgage of \$1000, an equity in it about \$4000, and \$100. in bank! And that is as far as I will ever get. I am now on the divide, earning as much as I ever will, with nothing going in the bank for a rainy day. Well! It isn't wealth exactly, but all considered isn't it enough?

Let us see what I have against it: a good wife, the best that ever lived, good children, none of whom will ever be rich, but all of whom I hope and believe, will be always good, stand up for the right and fight for it if need be. A place of usefulness for myself, friends, good and true— What more can a man want?

Truly I *am* rich after all in all that is really wealth, and

²⁸ Riis Clippings (Russell Sage Library).

²⁹ Dr. Robbins' account of a delightful visit to the Riis home.

³⁰ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

have abundant cause for thankfulness. I won't make any New Years resolutions, but I will try to deserve it all better than I have. A happy New Year to you, Jacob, along that line, and God bless us all!

So this experiment of the account book which was intended to show how it is that I keep poor, has demonstrated instead that I am rich, richer than most people.³¹

³¹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER XI

Riis as Good Government Clubs Agent

1

THE year 1896 stands out in American history as the year of Bryan's free-silver campaign. The depression was entering its fourth year. Municipal reform movements were in vogue throughout the United States, and in New York City bodies such as the Social Reform Club and the City Clubs were trying to hold the gains made as a result of the Lexow disclosures.

There is not much to indicate to what extent Riis was interested in the politics of the country at this time. He was intensely interested in local problems and seems to have given most of his attention to them. His own budget also caused him frequent moments of worry. We find in one of the pages of his account-book for the early part of this year the following items. Under income: "Tarrytown lecture, \$25.00, Journal \$6.60." Under expenditures: "Dancing school \$7.50, Children's allowance \$1.50, the Knights of Hercanum (Insurance) \$3.00, Church quarterly dues \$8.00, Flowers (for Lam) .25, Lam for Vivi's birthday \$1.50, Edward's schooling \$50.00, Crib and mattress \$5.75, Mother's Birthday \$5.50, Girl's wages \$14.00, Katie's doll \$1.50, Flagpole and flag \$25.00 [besides] burglar insurance \$6.25 [and] Coal (2 tons I got in Sept.) \$11.00." ¹

At his office he mapped out the many reforms which

¹ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

were needed. Dents had been made in the tenement districts by the clearing of the Bend and the razing of a few buildings elsewhere, but plenty of work along that line remained to be done. The Tenement House Law of 1895 must be enforced; Mr. Gilder was relying on him to furnish information regarding abuses. The police lodgings were closed, as has been stated, on February 15, 1896; but this action was only the first step toward the provision of a municipal shelter and of a farm colony for vagrants. Hard work on behalf of these projects was needed, and Mrs. Lowell and the others counted on Riis's aid. Again, Riis wanted to see plenty of playgrounds and parks established all over the city; this would require years of nagging at reluctant officials. There were a dozen plans for the future in his busy mind.

Riis had always been deeply touched by the miserable conditions under which the Jewish people lived in the East Side. He admired the way in which struggling fathers and mothers bent over their sweat-shop machines day and night trying valiantly to earn a living and to pull themselves up by the boot straps. In an article, "The Jews of New York" published in the *Review of Reviews* (January, 1906), he paid a tribute to Jewish indomitability. He told about the Baron de Hirsch movement—the establishment of a fifty-one hundred acre farm at Woodbine, New Jersey, for Jews who wished to better their lot outside the congested city. He told of the splendid work of Dr. Felix Adler in the Ethical Culture Society, and described the work of various Hebrew philanthropic agencies.

On January 16, 1896, we find him writing to Dr. Robbins:

MY DEAR DOCTOR:

Most assuredly the health inspector should have looked after that sweatshop. If you will send me, or get me the

address, I shall have it looked up and have that inspector better posted on his duties. I will talk with Pres't Wilson about printed postals and see what he says.

Shall be glad to hear your friend's tale of woe anent the schools. I've heard a good many and I profess little hope of relief from the present "reform" board. If they would only let me loose with a club or an axe-handle or a broomstick on the Board about 10 minutes, I think I should procure the reform so badly needed. As to Mr. Roosevelt and I coming over, perhaps he will soon have more leisure than I want him to have from his official duties. I hope Jove will smite this town with his lightning, smite it hip and thigh, if it sits by to see him fired out by the politicians and think of putting Byrnes back in control!! The Lord help us. Amen!

Yours in despair,

JACOB A. RIIS

Jan. 16, 1896

I open the letter to put this in to tell you that Mr. Mayor this afternoon appointed a Small Parks Committee to locate *one* park on the East Side (see the Evening Sun) and made you a member. I suggested you in place of Mrs. Lowell who would not serve. The rest of us are Dr. Kimber, Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Devins and myself. Now, don't you back out. We met at once. Get the Eve Sun and see what you did.

Yrs

RIIS ²

2

This year marked a slightly different turn in Riis's affairs. He accepted the position of General Agent of the Council of Good Government Clubs, at a salary of \$166.67 a month.³ This organization⁴ was an outgrowth of the municipal reform movement of the early nineties; Club A

² Dr. Robbins' collection.

³ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection). Mr. Riis's account-book, 1896-97.

⁴ Preble Tucker, "The Good Government Clubs," *North American Review* (July-Dec. 1894), p. 382; Club Book of Good Government Club A, May 1, 1895.

had been incorporated on February 28, 1893. Now (in 1896) there were a number of units, Clubs *A*, *B*, *C*, and so forth. The purpose of their work was implied in the name; as a nonpartizan organization they hoped to discourage corruption in politics and to bring about a better administration of city affairs. Among the measures which they advocated were: the elimination of bad housing, the construction of small parks, the amelioration of sweatshop and other bad labor conditions, the improvement of the education system, and the erection of a truant school. In this program may be recognized many of Mr. Riis's own plans. Indeed, it was he who helped to broaden the program of work undertaken by the clubs.

Up to this time Riis had worked either as an individual or as a member of some welfare committee. Once, during Mrs. Lowell's absence, he had served as Chairman of the Committee on Vagrancy; but in general he preferred not to hold executive positions. As the months wore on, he found his new duties rather irksome.

At first he found a burst of enthusiasm among the Club members; but before long politics began to creep into the organization. This he considered most unfortunate. He himself was much more interested in procuring social reform than in waving a banner in a political parade. He had favored the Democratic party during his early years in the country, but he was a violent opponent of Tammany and all its works.⁵ Moreover, as his friendship with Roosevelt deepened, he found himself leaning toward the Republican party, or at least toward the principles for which Roosevelt stood.⁶ In his post as Agent of the Good Government Clubs he did not try to formulate any high-flown philosophic concept of good government, but confined his

⁵ J. A. Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (New York, 1904), p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.* He took no great interest in abstract theories of government.

efforts mainly to a practical program for the better administration of affairs in New York City.

As executive officer of the Clubs, he appeared before the Mayor, and conferred with the Board of Police Magistrates, regarding vagrants and the proposed farm colony for the homeless. He urged city authorities to convert New York Marble Cemetery into a playground citing the action taken by European cities in this respect. To Daniel Parrish, Jr., an influential citizen, he wrote on April 20, 1896:⁷

DEAR SIR:

Has Ex-Mayor Hewitt communicated with you concerning the cemetery or with Mr. Downer? I had a talk with him, and he, as President of the Playgrounds Society took the matter in charge. . . .

I stand behind the business with the backing of the whole Good Government Club influence, if any is needed, at any point, and can marshal the Social Reform Union—the East Side Settlement—East Side Federation and no end of other organizations in case of need, at a moment's notice.

Truly yours,

JACOB A. RIIS

3

The summer of 1896 found Jake Riis a busy man indeed. He was keeping on with his newspaper work, writing magazine articles, and preparing material for a new book of stories. He was in demand for lectures and subject to call for committee meetings, to say nothing of carrying the responsibility of the Good Government job.

By this time he was able to turn from one type of writing to another without apparent effort. In the October *Forum* he had a picturesque account of a shipwreck off Denmark, "What Became of Dennis Martin?" The December *Cen-*

⁷ Riis letter (New York Historical Society). He wrote one also to Chas. G. Wilson, President of the Board of Health, on June 25, 1896, in regard to the same matter.

tury contained an article by him called "Light in Dark Places," a forceful indictment of conditions in the slums. An indication of the impression which he created is given by Mr. Gilder's introduction to the article: "...he is not among those who let their sympathy and emotions run away with their judgments; he has worked for practicable and just measures of improvement...."

During this summer he mapped out plans for the Good Government Clubs. On July 29th he wrote to Mr. Gilder: "Mr. Bainbridge was here today and I had a polling place and a policeman and a truculent citizen, an illegal voter, set up for him; at least I fixed it to be set up so that he might draw at leisure his election sketch."⁸

In another letter to Mr. Gilder, also dated July 29th, he wrote:

I thank you for the clipping from the *Evng Post*. It had escaped me. While you were away I set one of the G. G. Clubs to work inquiring into the enforcement of the special Section; but I have not heard of any progress. I am now having lists made of the paint and oil shops, drug-stores, saloons and bakeries & feed stores in all the city with the intention of having the Clubs report on every one. In that way only can we be sure the law is enforced. It is a big job, but they wanted work, and that is exactly in a line with what I intend them to do.

I shall look this case up personally and let you know. I have also assembled all the "fire" reporters and asked them henceforth to pay particular attention to this phase of their work and bring out strong any violation of law.

The truant school question I hoped would come up for full discussion, but either I am too insignificant for Mr. Little to deal with or they think discretion the better part of valor. I guess I shall have to twist the lion's tail once more.

Faithfully yrs

JACOB A. RIIS⁹

⁸ Gilder Papers (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

⁹ *Ibid.*

On August 20th he wrote to Mr. Gilder enclosing a clipping "Fire in a Tenement":¹⁰

MY DEAR MR. GILDER:

In this case (slip enclosed) the law was observed to the extent of iron sheeting the 3 doors leading out of the store to the interior of the house. There were no transoms. The fire did not pass the sheet-iron barrier, but it did spread upward through a light shaft without skylight as reported by the man I sent to investigate. This is a matter not mentioned in the law, and not easily dealt with apparently. However, the purpose of the law, that of securing the tenants against an ambuscade *in the stairway*, was accomplished by the simple means of armoring the doors. They had time to get out.

I hope to see you as soon as I return from my 2 weeks vacation which I begin to-morrow. My lists of all the paint & oil stores, saloons, drug stores, etc., touched by the law are ready and being distributed.

Faithfully yrs,

JACOB A. RIIS

It was the era of "sand gardens" in the play movement of this country, and Riis had doubtless heard how useful this sort of playplace had proved to be in Boston and elsewhere. In a piece called "In a City Coney Island,"¹¹ which appeared in the *Evening Sun* on August 1st he wrote:

Some months ago the Park Commissioners were asked to establish in Central Park as well as in the new small parks all over the city little "Coney Islands"—that is, sand heaps in which the children may dig and revel at will, because that is what children, of all things, like to do. They didn't do it, at least not yet, but they let it be known at the time that they were not averse to the plan that has proved such a success in the great cities of Europe, as, indeed why should they be,

¹⁰ Gilder Papers (American Academy of Arts and Letters).

¹¹ The signed article was written as a result of correspondence with Walter Rauschenbush of The Brotherhood of the Kingdom regarding sandhills (Letter from Mr. Rauschenbush, Jan. 27, 1896, Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

since there is absolutely nothing against it and everything for it. If now any doubt linger in their minds as to whether it is perfectly proper, they have an opportunity to see the "Coney Island" at work in all its glory in the playground behind the long fence in Thirty-seventh Street just west of Seventh Avenue, and the sooner they take the opportunity the better for them and for the children of New York.

In the midst of his work as Good Government Club Secretary he wrote a news story about Potters' Field burials.¹² In this article he gave figures to show the number of pauper interments from 1880 through 1895. One person in five, he said, died a public charge, and one in ten was interred in Potters' Field. His story concluded with the message:

So it all comes down in the end to Education as the one and only cure for the poverty problem. And there lies the responsibility that pricked the conscience of the shocked citizen, perhaps, without his knowing it. It is the business of him who has succeeded to see that that other who did not or that those who come after him, cursed with the burden that dragged him down, have the chance he missed. That is where he can help. The children of poverty are the key to the problem. They are the problem itself. This is the responsibility of the wealth that has increased so fast, yet leaving them in their net; to build schools, give them playgrounds, decent houses—in short, give the children a chance. Then and not until then will the Potters' Field cease to demand its tithe and the jail to levy its tribute on our city's life.

That summer he again took a brief vacation with the family in Becket, but by September 3rd he had settled down to his winter's work. As Agent of the Good Government Club, he wrote to the President of the Board of Fire Commissioners calling attention to laxity in enforcement of the Tenement House Law:¹³

¹² New York *Evening Sun*, April 25, 1896.

¹³ Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library).

Oct. 9, 1896

DEAR SIR:—

I thank you for the information in relation to the fire in the bake-shop at No. 2365 Third Avenue, from which it appears that

1. The fire was caused by conditions that are in violation of the tenement house law and

2. That no permit to conduct the business in a legal manner had been issued by the Fire Department in this instance.

The law forbidding the boiling of fat in bakeries except under permit by the Fire Department, went into force September 1st, 1895. Last Spring the Board of Health caused to be transmitted to your honorable Board lists of 515 bake-shops carrying on their business in defiance of this law, directing attention to this fact and to the only authority under which they could transact business in tenements namely by permit of your Board. Up to August 26, as the books of your Department showed, only 8 such permits had been issued.

It appears then that this law, the purpose of which was to secure tenants against the danger of sudden fire in the night, has been practically nullified by the failure of someone to take official action. The law does not direct the issue of permits by the Fire Department, though its enforcement, as matters stand, depends in this particular upon such issue. As a step towards clearing the situation, allow me to inquire, whether your Department holds itself responsible for the enforcement of this section of the tenement house law, or whether it puts the burden of such enforcement upon any other authority.

Thanking you for your courtesy, I remain, with confident wishes for the increased efficiency of the Fire Department under your administration.

Yours faithfully

He received a very discouraging answer to this letter. It seemed that the Fire Department gave permits only to fireproof houses and that the enforcement of other provisions of the law lay with the Health Department.¹⁴ The

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Fire Commissioner asserted that it was the duty of the Health officials to proceed. After reading this letter, Riis felt that he could get no direct action; responsibility was shifted, and reforms were dishearteningly slow.

Besides interesting himself in the condition of the tenements, in the problem of truancy,¹⁵ in the establishment of playgrounds, and the like, Riis was deeply concerned with labor conditions and the problem of the trade unions. In the *Atlantic Monthly* for November, 1896, we find an article by him called "Out of the Book of Humanity," a plea for better conditions for the slum toiler.

Again and again he came back to the subject of truants. On October 12, 1896, the *Evening Sun* printed a long signed article by him on the establishment of the first truant class in the Seventh Avenue Industrial School.¹⁶ This class was an experiment initiated by the Children's Aid Society. Riis wrote:

While the Board of Education is trifling with the truancy question, even after the pointed reminder received from Albany that the State Superintendent holds the Establishment of a proper truant school essential to the Enforcement of the Compulsory Education law, a new factor has entered the field which promises to supply through philanthropic effort, at least in part, what argument and angry protest have alike failed to wrench from the circumlocution office in Grand Street. This factor is the Children's Aid Society, which has, on its own account, begun the establishment of truant classes.

The case against New York's way of dealing with truants is the case of civilization....

¹⁵ Riis's signed letter to the *Evening Post*, printed Aug. 3, 1896, in which he advocated truant schools and condemned juvenile asylums; letters from Principal of Brooklyn Truant School dated Aug. 7, 1896, and from State Department of Public Instruction dated Aug. 14, 1896 (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

¹⁶ Signed story in New York *Evening Sun*, Oct. 12, 1896 (1¼ columns).

A letter to Mr. Gilder dated December 3, 1896, reads:

DEAR MR. GILDER—

Will you not sometime procure for me an invitation to a meeting of Club F, your G. G. Club, so that I may talk the work over with it. I do not like its attitude toward the work and have never met the club. I would like to see it, too, appoint a Committee with you at its head to see to it that the Tenement House Law was properly framed in the New Charter.

Your kind words of me in the Century have made me thoroughly ashamed of myself, and yet so proud that I shall shortly be an offence [that] stinks to heaven in the nostrils of the other newspaper men. I wish to God that I might deserve what you said of me in even a small measure, and I am going to try. I am going to try harder than ever to show that a reporter can be useful also to his day and his city even as a reporter. . . .¹⁷

Christmas was just around the corner, and with it came poignant memories of old Ribe. On December 8, 1896, he wrote to his sister Emma:¹⁸

MY DEAR SISTER EMMA,

It is a long time since I've written to you but this does not mean I have not thought about you often. If you think so, you are mistaken. If we but had the peace and quiet of Ribe, then we would accomplish many other things now left undone, dear Emma. I would regret it if I had to give up writing my Danish newspaper articles. It helps me to keep up my Danish. But alas! I have not written for several weeks. I'm writing to-night, even if I have to sit up all night. This is why we so often send a thought instead of a friendly letter. The preface of the article in the magazine I'm sending you will give you some idea of my many activities. The newspaper writing is my bread and butter. The article exaggerates a great

¹⁷ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, Dec. 3, 1896 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

¹⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Emma Reinsholm (Dan-America Museum).

deal, as the editor is a great friend. Still it feels good to be respected. He is a great philanthropist, as well as author and editor. Will you translate this for Mother? The rest will not interest either of you. Dear Auntie, we have been thinking often of her during the past week. Lammet and the children love her. Who could help it? She was extremely happy when she visited the children, so interested in anything concerning us, and so overjoyed at being with us. Last night we sat and smiled at the thought of Auntie smuggling her belongings home when she was ill and believed the end near. Dear old soul, faithful to the end, could we all face God as faithful and good as she, may God help us. We discussed it all yesterday and if you should ever be tired of Denmark, little Emma, and want to be with those who love you here, then come over. The voyage is now a simple matter, and you will find a room that has long been waiting for a dear guest from Denmark. We are sending Clara to Denmark in the spring, God willing. Will you be a sister to her, Emma, and keep an eye on her. She is not very strong and will not be going to school again. It is extraordinary that our children should be frail. Neither Lammet nor I are weaklings, but I expect they will outgrow it. If only we could also come to Denmark in the Spring! But we must wait. I am not ready yet. However, tell Mother that we will surely come. It is a stronger tie that binds me to Denmark than I sometimes think. I would rather have a Danish order (like my father who received this order from King Christian) than all the praise I receive for my work here. Even a democrat can dream of this. Dear Emma, we are allowed to wish. We don't need to forget our old Mother for a young wife any more than our old home for the new. God be with you, dear Sister—now I must also write Fibbe.

CHAPTER XII

Mulberry Bend Park Is Opened

I

WITH the Christmas holidays behind him, he plunged into his busy round of duties again. He had been ill with a cold in December and still felt the after effects; jobs now seemed to pile in on him faster than he could get the work done. He expressed some of the feeling of pressure in a letter to Mr. Gilder on January 12, 1897:¹

I thank you right heartily for your good opinion of my work. I only wish there were more of it. I was home with a cold in December and used those days to great advantage. Stories ran from me like water. But since my return to the office I have become clogged up once more. Nothing will run out. The fact is that I work here till 8 P. M. and it takes all the spunk there is in me. I am stalled in the middle of the book of stories I intended for you and have begun seriously to question whether *any* of it is worth putting between covers.

I have come nearly to the parting of the ways, after twenty years in Mulberry Street where I ought to make up my mind to let the daily newspaper work go, as go it must in a few years, when I shall be too old to run around, but "the deadly certainty of salary makes cowards of us all." When my boys begin to strike out for themselves perhaps I shall feel more ready to let go, if it is not then too late. Until then it is my chief solace that despite my utter unworthiness I enjoy your good will and esteem. Some day I shall earn it. I am coming in to see you about those feasts. They sit heavy on my soul and

¹ The Century Collection (New York Public Library, MSS.).

conscience. Why can't H—— write the Jewish one? I haven't got hold of it right.

Yours forever,
JACOB A. RIIS

His faithful Max helped to lighten much of the burden of newspaper work; but even so, the writing was a job in itself, and any time that he gave to the Good Government Clubs had to be squeezed out of an already full day. How he found time to write long letters and the petitions necessary in his post as General Agent is a mystery; he must have had to spend hours in toil after the rest of the family had gone to bed.

He was, of course, deeply interested in the work of the Good Government Clubs. As their agent he urged the use of school buildings for boys' clubs;² he also urged the passage by the legislature of a bill establishing a farm colony for vagrants, in line with suggestions made previously by the Committee on Vagrants. He wrote to Dr. Felix Adler for comments about the clubs for boys, and received a cordial response:³

MY DEAR MR. RIIS:

Thanks for your lines of the 6th inst. and the good wishes which are cordially reciprocated. I shall be glad to talk over John's schooling with you whenever you can come in.

Your move to open the Schoolrooms for the use of Clubs is in the right direction, of course. But the matter will have to be very carefully managed and no clubs admitted except under proper guardians (Volunteer guardians are not always to be relied on) or else there will be no end of trouble. It is far easier to keep boys well behaved under the discipline of masters than to allow them independence and yet secure good order. But, of course, you know all this. I only mention it be-

² He had extensive correspondence with Miss Winifred Buck of New York City, who was interested in the establishment of boys' clubs (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

³ Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library).

cause my experience has showed me how hard it is to get and to keep the right kind of volunteer assistants in such work.

Yours sincerely,
FELIX ADLER

A few weeks later he wrote a letter to Assemblyman Laimbeer, who, he thought, would defend the farm-colony bill which the Vagrancy Committee had submitted: ⁴

*Council of Confederate Good
Government Clubs*
New York, March 11, 1897

MY DEAR MR. LAIMBEER:

Mrs. Lowell, Mr. McKim and I saw the Mayor this morning. He assured us in the most direct and positive terms that he would not oppose the bill, said it would be all right in his hands and authorized us to announce this. Mrs. Lowell has written Mr. Clark to that effect, and the Mayor himself will tell him. There will be no further opposition from the city.

As to the merits of the bill, we who advocate it do so with a feeling of pride in what has been achieved by the present administration toward the establishment of an excellent and humane system of dealing with the ever more perplexing problem of vagrancy. In that system, which has been evolved during these last two years, the farm colony is to be the last link. Without it, the chain is incomplete and practically worthless.

The farm-school is to take the place of the work-house for those homeless men who can be trained to become useful citizens. That number is very large, as our lodging-house records show winter after winter. What ails the tramp is incapacity, lack of training. He is not fit to make headway in a crowd. For that reason he soon loses courage, slips farther and farther down until the tramp-spirit comes upon him and to help him is no longer possible. The farm-colony is to help such and those who by other ways have come upon this level, to win them back to habits of industry and steady work. It is not to punish them, but to give them a chance. It is conceived in

⁴ Copy of letter in Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library).

kindness. The unkindest thing that can be done to the tramp is to let him go on tramping. It is also a great waste and expense to the community, and one that keeps growing if not checked.

For this class there is now only the workhouse but the workhouse is no solution; it is only an aggravation of the problem. It is positive and final ruin to the homeless man not yet a tramp. The magistrate will not send such a one there for that reason, and the only alternative is the street and more tramping.

The law is not compulsory. It commits the city to nothing, merely makes it possible to forge the missing link in the system of dealing with the homeless. The passing of it does not direct the expenditure of one dollar. The plan is not an untried experiment. It is working most successfully in other communities. It follows the principle which all experience has settled as fundamental that charity to be effective, remedial, must ever take the form of education in some way. In other words, it aims at cutting off the waste of homelessness at the source, where alone it can be stopped. In doing this it strikes the road which is the one highway leading out of the slum; it puts the idle man on the idle land.

Mushy philanthropy and utter recklessness on the part of the authorities have in the past put a premium on begging and vagrancy in New York. It has been a heavy premium, heavy in what it has cost the city; much heavier in the waste and misery it has entailed upon its helpless victims. It is time it was taken off, and that is what your bill proposes to do.

The time is opportune. The disgraceful police-station lodgings have been closed, the stale beer dives are gone, and so are the free-lunch counters. The lodging house registry law has disposed of the election temptations in large measure. We have a decent city lodging house where a homeless man is treated as a human being, a system of intelligent inquiry into the stories of the lodgers and a police program of war on beggary. To complete it all there is needed only this Farm Colony. I am sure it will pass, for all the arguments are for it, none against it. The work-house extension on Riker's Island, to which Mr. Clark alluded, does not cover the ground. It does not furnish a place where the person committed may

be kept *long-enough* to do him good, even if a work-house of any kind were capable of doing him good. The Mayor admits this. He said to us that the two things were to be kept entirely apart. Excuse this long screed. I wanted to put the case fully before you, from my point of view, so that you may be able to defend it in the Assembly. For this reason, I send this to Mrs. Lowell with the request that she add anything that suggests itself to her. If necessary, I will be glad to come up and back the bill in the Senate. But with the endorsement by the Mayor, that may not be necessary, perhaps.

Faithfully yours,

JACOB A. RIIS

His efforts as General Agent were valuable in that he brought the seasoned experience of years of labor to the work of reform; but the spontaneity which stamped whatever Riis did seemed a little subdued by the responsibilities involved in supervising the club progress. He began to look forward to the time when he should be able to give up the post. As the weeks wore on, he became more than ever desirous of being freed from it, and in the spring he tendered his resignation.

2

Washington, that spring, thrilled to the excitement of seeing a new president inaugurated, and the whole country was curious to know what the McKinley administration would do to bring prosperity to the country, which had been suffering from depression for four years. Signs of optimism began to appear—a perky feather in last year's hat, a quickened step up the Avenue, the grocer boy, a little heavier laden, cheerily whistling a popular tune of the day. In it all there was something of a martial tempo occasioned perhaps by the talk of possible trouble with Spain. Whether the change of presidents had much to do

with the general state of renewed well-being is a question; but certain it is that beginning with this year the average citizen found himself a little better satisfied with life and more hopeful of advance in the future.

Hardly had President McKinley taken office when everybody began to speculate about the Cabinet appointments; and before long there was talk that Theodore Roosevelt was slated for the position of Assistant Secretary of the Navy. To appoint him would be to reward a good Republican; moreover the office called for a person who would be enthusiastic in equipping recruits in case war should come, and this qualification was met by T. R. And so there was not much surprise, in New York at any rate, when on April 19, 1897, Police Commissioner Roosevelt laid down his tasks at headquarters and accepted the Cabinet position.

The appointment was a significant upward step in Roosevelt's career. At the same time it offered release from a situation which had grown increasingly difficult during the past two years. The harmony of those first idyllic days on the Police Board had soon been broken.⁵ Bickering and party dissensions had blocked him or had caused so much strain that in later months he had found every step of the way hard. In spite of that fact, however, he had continued his drastic efforts to keep the department clean; and in general he had succeeded. Criticisms had stung, but he had withstood them. For instance, there were always those who put a shady interpretation upon his visits to the slums; when he closed the police lodgings, a cartoon intended to discredit him depicted a poor tramp shivering amid the winter snows and sadly reading the sign posted outside the station-house door. Recently the *New York Journal* had

⁵ *New York Times*, May 20, 1896.

attacked him because he had visited the newspaper's soup kitchen⁶ and had commented unfavorably upon it. This paper scathingly referred to the Commissioner's inspection and poked fun at the "Attaché of the Old Journalism" (Riis) who had accompanied him. Needless to say, Riis indignantly answered *The Journal* story by another one which bore the caption "A Fraud Upon the Public—The Truth About the Journal's Soup Kitchen,"⁷ in which he scored the paper for exploiting vagrants as an advertising medium. Thus quarrels flamed up and died down.

On the day when Roosevelt left Police Headquarters Riis felt that the "Golden Age" had ended. The continuous bustle and excitement of the past two years had gone; things had quieted down. There was plenty of work to do, but not nearly the same sense of high adventure in doing it. But if Riis felt as though the bottom had dropped out, he gave little indication of it as he labored that spring.

3

The great day for which Jacob Riis had been waiting more than fourteen years came at last. On June 15, 1897, there was to be a formal opening of Mulberry Bend Park, with band and speeches. It was the subject probably nearest to his heart with the possible exception of the police-station lodgings. Actual work on the park had been completed some months before, but now a fanfare of trumpets and a burst of applause were to proclaim the achievement. Riis had thought that maybe in some morning's mail there would come a little white card⁸ inviting him to be present and say a few words. Nevertheless, the

⁶ *The Sun*, Feb. 11, 1897.

⁷ *New York Evening Sun*, Feb. 24, 1897 (signed story).

⁸ Minutes and Documents of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Parks, New York, 1898, p. 43.

hour for the ceremonies approached and no message arrived.

On that important night of June 15th, he and Lincoln Steffens stepped briskly down Mulberry Street toward the Bend. As they came in sight of the "elbow," they hastened their steps. Five thousand persons, mostly boys and girls, jabbered in many tongues as they waited for the magic moment. It was a warm evening and the tenements bordering the park had disgorged their sweltering population. While few costumes were worn, here and there silken robes of old China mingled with gay shawls of South Europe in that happy, jostling crowd. Tired mothers pushed their baby carriages a little closer to catch the first strains of "Mulberry Bend March." White-faced youngsters were poised on tiptoe to see over the heads of the crowd. Suddenly the band was playing, and the speakers were mounting the steps of the pavilion. Mayor Strong and the congressmen from the district delivered their addresses. Other authorities spoke. At last it was Colonel Waring's turn.⁹ He delivered a two-minute speech and at the end directed three cheers for Jacob Riis to whom, he said, chief credit was due. Five thousand voices responded with a will: "Hooray! Jacob Riis!" Then the speeches were over and the band was spiritedly playing "Sweet Rosie O'Grady," "Paradise Alley," and other popular songs out of deference to the wishes of the crowd.¹⁰

And so Mulberry Bend Park was given to the people who needed it—to frail mothers and their sickly little children, to romping boys and girls who needed a place to play in. Upon this spot, where once grim tenements had stood, green grass could now be seen, and walks with benches stretched from end to end. The big blue patch

⁹ *The Sun*, June 16, 1897; *New York Times*, June 16, 1897.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

of sky would be a novel sight to the toiling folk below.

As Jacob Riis moved slowly away from the scene, he could hear the cheers still ringing. Any little feeling of pique which he might earlier have had at not being invited had flitted away with the first sight of that joyous crowd. At that moment—so he later said—he realized that victory in the accomplishment of a good work and not personal recognition is the really important thing in life.¹¹

4

As the day approached when Riis was to give up his work as General Agent of the Good Government Club, he hurried to bring as many as possible of the undertakings of the club to fruition. On one of the last days he took stock of what had been accomplished. During the past year the clubs had lent the weight of their influence to measures for tearing down unfit buildings; they had helped in the establishment of a truant school; and they had brought pressure in favor of remodeling the whole school system. They had been influential in getting the old Tombs demolished and a new prison authorized for the site. They had brought about an overhauling of the civil courts and had seen to it that provisions for new courts were included in the charter for Greater New York. And they had caused the closing of the cruller bakeries located in tenement-house cellars.¹² Indeed, as Riis looked back over the work, he was glad he had been a part of this movement. Perhaps he underestimated his personal accomplishment in the carrying out of the program.

His last act as officer was to help get Mayor Strong to appoint a Small Parks Committee; and in June 1897—just ten years after the passage of the Small Parks Act of 1887—

¹¹ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901), p. 284.

¹² Riis Papers (Russell Sage Library).

a special body to be known as the Small Parks Committee was appointed.¹³ Abram S. Hewitt, who had been Mayor when the original act was passed, was appointed chairman. He was heard to remark that everything took ten years¹⁴ and some of the reformers were inclined to agree with him. Jacob Riis was made secretary of the Committee, and the other members were Dewitt J. Seligman, John B. Devins, Myer S. Isaacs, James J. Higginson, William R. Stewart, and Joseph D. Bryan; Charles G. Wilson and Samuel McMillan ex-officio members.

As a part of the measure authorizing this body, the city agreed to the immediate laying out of two additional small parks on the East Side where crowds were densest. Riis had himself made a member of the citizens' committee to locate the sites; recommendations were made, resolutions drawn up, and within three weeks the Small Parks Committee went to the legislature with a bill authorizing the city to seize the property. The bill was passed, and the razing of tenements began.

In the ensuing months the Small Parks Committee prepared an exhaustive report,¹⁵ in which it recommended that parks be created in practically every ward in the city where there were tenements. The report outlined the needs of each ward, presenting tables to show the acreage of the ward, the population, the density of population per acre, the number of children under fifteen years of age, the density of child population per acre, and the death-rate in each ward in 1896 as compared with the death-rate in that year for the entire city. The high death-rate of children under five living in the slums was also shown.

Another valuable piece of evidence given in the report

¹³ Citizens' Union, Pamphlet No. 6.

¹⁴ J. A. Riis, *A Ten Years' War* (Boston, 1900), p. 185.

¹⁵ Report of the Committee on Small Parks, City of New York, Oct. 28, 1897.

was the statistical statement of the death-rate in New York from 1865 through 1896 and the population of the city by wards during that time. Accompanying the report was a map showing the parks already existing or in process of construction, the new schools, areas where the number of arrests was very high, overcrowded areas, and the lack of playgrounds was noted. Also included in the report was the text of the Small Parks Act, Chapter 320 of the Laws of 1887.

Early in the autumn of 1897, a subcommittee of the Committee on Small Parks investigated the possibility of removing the inadequate Reform School situated on Randall's Island, and making the island into a park.¹⁶ Riis was active in the plan. He visited the Reform School and brought back reports of conditions among juvenile offenders. Nevertheless, in spite of the work of the committee and their subsequent report, nothing was done. Homer Folks said years later that the Randall's Island project was, so far as he knew, the only instance of an attempt at reform on Riis's part which met with complete failure.¹⁷

By no means discouraged by this one defeat, the Small Parks Committee turned its attention elsewhere. In co-operation with other agencies, they appealed to the Board of Commissioners of Public Parks to establish an open-air gymnasium and playground. Their letter follows: ¹⁸

The undersigned representing a joint committee of the Metropolitan Association of the Amateur Athletic Union of the U. S.; the N. Y. District Turner Societies; The Athletic League of the Y. M. C. A.; The Association for the Advancement of Physical Education; The Interscholastic Athletic Association and the Social Reform Club, beg leave to recommend

¹⁶ Report made out on Oct. 25, 1897 (J. B. Devins and James T. Higginson were on the committee). (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library.)

¹⁷ Interview with Homer Folks, September, 1933.

¹⁸ Letter dated Nov. 29, 1897 (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

for your favorable consideration, a proposition for the establishment of an open air gymnasium play-ground, upon a plot of ground, approximately 150 ft. x 200 ft., at the Northerly end and comprising a portion of the "East River Park" at Ave. B. and 87th to 88th Streets.

Our committee, at an informal conference with Commissioner Cruge of your Board, had on Oct. 12th, '97 received the information that a portion of the above named park had been already set aside, by resolution, for this purpose and that an appropriation had also been made for its enactment. Our Committee, with the assistance of experts has made a most careful inspection of this park both at the site and from diagram received from Supt. Parsons and has arrived at the conclusion first: that it would be inadvisable and indeed unnecessary to disturb or alter in any way, either the present park pathways, or tree growth; secondly: that the before mentioned plot is the only portion of this park which is suitable for the purpose; thirdly: that this plot is suitable for a gymnasium playground arranged for children of both sexes of the ages from 6 to 15 years.

BARTOW S. WEEKS

A. G. MILLS

JACOB A. RIIS

JULIUS F. HARDER

194 BROADWAY

As secretary of the committee, Riis made a long and intensive effort to get the use of schools for clubs and to promote the idea of better playgrounds. Being asked to give his view in regard to the educational value of well planned recreation he wrote: ¹⁹

...the proposition is that they shall be opened to the general neighborhood when the school is not in session, that is: after school hours, on Saturday, and during the long vacation. To the end that they may serve the purpose of public playgrounds, two things are requisite: they must be of suffi-

¹⁹ Letter dated Jan. 25th, 1898, to the chairman of the Committee on Instructions (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

cient size, and there must be proper superintendence at all times. The last of the two presents no obstacle. I have talked the matter over with the Chief of Police and he tells me that he will furnish all needful protection—

If by "Education" is understood merely the process of imparting information in the class-room, of cramming the children with facts for future use, from which the play-hour is rest compelled only by physical necessity, then the playground has no place in the Educational Machinery. The subject might as well be dismissed at once. But if the term stands for whatever goes to make character and to mould the mind of the child, all the rest being the mere scaffolding necessary in the process, then indeed the wiping out of the old injury, the gravest that could be inflicted upon a generation, that of robbing the child of his play, is Educational in the highest sense, and the public playground should be justly a part of the Educational scheme.

While the law of 1895 had directed the laying out of additional parks, action was slow, as has been seen in the case of the Bend. The work of the Small Parks Committee in keeping the subject before the public and in taking steps to get more playgrounds was a valuable contribution to New York life. Their efforts helped pave²⁰ the way for a network of parks of which the first was opened in 1899. The city eventually opened up evening recreation centers in the unused school buildings, and the schools thus became something of a center for community life and play. It must, of course, be remembered that there were other groups²¹ working toward the same ends, and the committee must not be given more than its due share of the credit for these developments. Riis, as secretary co-

²⁰ J. Lee, *Constructive and Preventive Philanthropy* (New York, 1902), p. 167.

²¹ The Outdoor Recreation League, a kind of playground and gymnasium group formed from several other societies, was important in furthering play facilities, and in 1899 the League took charge of Seward Park and other playgrounds and put in apparatus and instructors. *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 174.

operating with Chairman Hewitt, was influential in keeping the matter before the public; and in later years he was referred to as "the father of the small-parks movement" because of his activities at this time as well as of his earlier work in behalf of the Bend.²²

5

Election time was coming in November, 1897, and reformers feared the worst. The Strong administration had petered out because of a rising tide of political discord. The betting was two to one, and higher, in favor of the Tiger's return. Boss Richard Croker, back from his Irish estate, got Tammany to put up Robert C. Van Wyck, a figure head; the Fusionists nominated Benjamin Tracy, and the Republicans nominated Seth Low.

The reform element did what it could to remind the people of the evils of the old system in the early nineties before the Tammany upheaval. On the other hand, Tammany pointed out the weaknesses, and of course there were many,²³ in the Strong administration of the past two years. In the end, Van Wyck was elected. As returns came in, a noisy, boisterous crowd jammed the streets to hail the Tammany victory. Apparently the Lexow investigation had been forgotten. Yet there was not complete discouragement; for many reform agencies had come into being. The Citizens' Union, the Social Reform Club, and many other civic organizations were sure to keep the subject of better municipal administration before the public, and newspaper men who, like Riis, were devoted to reform, would continue to unearth and expose corruption.

²² When the Playground and Recreation Association of America was founded at Washington, D. C., on April 12, 1906, Riis was made Honorary Vice President, a position which he held during the remainder of his life.

²³ New York *Herald*, March 9, 1897; *The World*, March 10, 1897.

And so it was that in those last weeks of 1897 Mulberry Street hummed with the voices of many politicians speculating on what would happen after January 1st when the new administration took office. Those who wished favor bowed and scraped in and out of the Police Headquarters door, while across the street at No. 301 the master minds among the reporters did some guessing as to where Tammany would let the hatchet fall.

6

Although we have watched Riis's work during this year chiefly in connection with the Good Government Clubs and the Small Parks Committee, we must not lose sight of the fact that all along he had steadily kept at his writing, not only for the newspaper but for the magazines. During the summer he began a translation of the old Danish story of Hamlet. His daughter Clara went to Denmark for a long visit and while there took some pictures. In October he finished the translation, and sent it to Mr. Gilder (who had asked him to do the work) with these lines: "Hamlet I promised you. I think you will find it worth filing away in your Shakespeare for reference. I don't know of any other place where it is found in translation."²⁴ The translation is almost literal, and is a curious instance of how old Danish lends itself to the purpose."²⁵ He also wrote for *The Century* a short paper, "Difficulties of a Deacon," telling of his experiences at the Richmond Hill Congregational Church some years before, and for *The Independent*, "Jack's Sermon." For the February, 1898, issue of *The Century* he completed an article on New York firemen, "Heroes Who Fight Fire."

²⁴ He wrote an article "Hamlet's Castle," for *The Century*, LXI (January, 1901), pp. 388-397.

²⁵ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

The year 1897

According to the best reckoning I can
make, my income in the year
was

_____ \$ 5.762. 12
and my expenses, including
\$ 1000 paid on my house - 5.561. 11

which should leave me 201. 01

At the beginning of the year I had
in bank

_____ 166. 66

and so I should really have \$ 367 67.

As a matter of fact I have
in bank about 30. 00
and in shares in Alge Liberman
Hamer Co, paid up - 1.00
for all _____ 70. 00

This makes me tired.

Riis

Courtesy of Mr. Roger William Riis

A PAGE FROM THE ACCOUNT BOOK OF JACOB A. RIIS

7

Again Christmas was in the air and with it special thoughts of old friends. This December Riis sent a very special invitation:

MY DEAR MR. GILDER—

So, you could use the “deacon” could you? Well, I am glad this morning. . . . My sleeves are full of that kind of “experiences.” I have had lots of them.

Now, another thing: Sometime between Christmas and New Years, Dr. Adler and his wife will come out to dinner with me. Can I get you and Mrs. Gilder to come, too? I give you fair warning that I invite you to a Danish Christmas dinner, roast goose, rice pudding, etc., just as we got it in my boyhood. Forewarned is forearmed. You shall meet only the Adlers and my friend McCloy and Mrs. McCloy. McCloy is the editor of the Evening Sun, but you will not mind that. He is a splendid fellow and I would like him to meet you as my friend. Ever after he will be yours also.

Now, will you not discuss this with Mrs. Gilder and let me know the date. I give you at present the choice between Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday (Dec. 27-29). When you have had your pick I will consult Dr. Adler, who has already tentatively surrendered us those days. Will you come? You can get home by 10 P. M. train, which will fetch you to your house before 11. *No evening clothes.*

The Christmas article does look well, doesn't it? I am glad.

Faithfully yrs,

JACOB A. RIIS ²⁶

On one of those last days of the old year he took out his account-book²⁷ and brought it up to date. The items entered are interesting because they show the rate of his earnings:

²⁶ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, Dec. 2, 1897 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

²⁷ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

Century (Deacon Story)	40.
Sun space	14.20
Eve Sun sal.	50.00
“ “ “	50.00
Sun Space	14.20
Borrowed from Dr. Tracy	50.00
drawn from bank	15.00
Sun Space	12.45
Eve. Sun. Sal.	50.
Century Fireman's Article	200.00
Sun Space	19.60
Jacks Sermon "Independence"	18.00
Eve. Sun Salary	50.00
Sun Space	15.00
	<hr/>
	648.45

Closing the book, he leaned back in his chair and his eyes held the far-away look of one who glances both back into the past and forward to the good things of the future. He had a vision of children romping in the Mulberry Bend Park, opened since last June. He saw a multitude of ragged men and women who had drifted into his office and out again. He stood before a crowded auditorium where a sea of faces stretched before him and listening ears heard the pathetic story of human misery. Far across the river he saw a green space where some day a farm school for truant boys would undoubtedly stand. All around him in his dream was a band of earnest men and women who had worked as he had worked to better the cause of the poor. There was indeed hard toil ahead but much had been accomplished.

CHAPTER XIII

The Riises Watch the War

I

IN January, 1898, a war was hovering over the nation.¹ For several years Cuba had been in a state of insurrection against Spain, and the situation had caused much concern in the United States. The sugar crop of Cuba had dropped to a fragment of its former size so that many American sugar refineries were deprived of their raw material. American naval authorities had an eye on the island so strategically situated with regard to the Caribbean ports. Public-health officials feared that the poor sanitation in Cuba caused by the disturbed state of the country would make the region a source of contagion. But chief among the forces tending to bring about intervention was the surge of humanitarian feeling which swept over the United States at the thought of Spanish oppression in Cuba. A wave of emotionalism accompanied the happenings of the next few weeks.

In January it was rumored that within a few weeks the government would be sending an army to Cuba. Probably this impression was strengthened by the report that Theodore Roosevelt, as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, was busily at work superintending the outfitting of recruits. On February 9th the *New York Journal* published

¹ P. T. Moon, *Imperialism and World Politics* (New York, 1932), pp. 416-420; A. M. Schlesinger, *Political and Social History of the United States* (New York, 1932), pp. 422-427; A. M. Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City* (New York, 1933), pp. 190-191.

in sensational form a statement to the effect that the Spanish minister in Washington, Dupuy de Lome, had sent a confidential letter in which he described McKinley as a sly politician and admitted his own duplicity in a certain transaction being negotiated between the United States and Spain. On February 15th came the news that the warship *Maine* had been sunk in Havana Harbor with a loss of 260 lives. Without determining whether the ship had been blown up by Spaniards, by Cuban insurgents, or by internal combustion, American patriots immediately demanded redress.

These developments were especially interesting to the Riises on account of their personal connection with Roosevelt. In fact Riis went to Washington for a short time in February to help his friend unofficially with some of the details of outfitting soldiers; but he had declined to accept any position. He did not wish to become involved in politics; moreover, he was pledged to give a number of lectures.

In January Kate and four-year-old Vivi had scarlet fever. As they convalesced, they entertained themselves with talk of war. We find this note tucked away among Mr. Riis's papers:² "February 1898 Maine disaster. [Vivi] sick with Scarlet fever threatens to go to war and whip the Spaniards. Mama has been reading 'The Wide, Wide World!!'"

When the war at last became a reality, the whole family eagerly awaited the latest extras with news of what T. R. and the Rough Riders were doing, and they followed every detail of the army movements. John was so enthusiastic that he forgot school and tried to run away to sea; and though Riis outwardly objected, he had a sympathetic feeling in his heart for this boy who reminded him of

² R. W. Riis collection.

what he had been long years ago. He thought of those days of disappointment in 1870 when he kept knocking at the door of the Consulate to offer his services and was turned down.

On May 4th, Riis wrote to his sister Emma:³

DEAR OLD EMMA:

I enclose a check for twelve Kroner for the chair. Of course, I should like to share and will also send an extra penny to Mother for her own use on this eventful day. Could I only be with you in Ribe; but for various reasons this is not possible. Not that the trip is too expensive, but the time is too valuable at the moment. I could not do it for less than \$400, even were I able to stay at home for two or three weeks; no, I'm afraid it cannot be done this time. However, I have been busy writing a small book of stories which should bring in enough money to enable me to make the trip next year. But we must wait and see. We have had illness all winter and Lammet has missed Clara very much. Under the circumstances it did not seem right for me to leave her; for this reason I also stayed away from Cuba. I had a very good offer from one of our large church papers which Henry Ward Beecher edited. It was very good and would have brought me about \$150. a week with all my expenses paid. It was a great confidence that was shown me. A large part of our population, especially in New England, do not think the war against Spain is just. The universities, especially disapprove. It would have been my work to find out the truth and write about it. This organization thinks that people would have faith in the author of "How the Other Half Lives" because they would have confidence in him while they refused to listen to the papers and the Congress. It was a nice offer and I was tempted more than ever before. The land and journey appealed to me very strongly. I should have gone with Clara Barton, the Red Cross Organizer, and while in Cuba I was supposed to find out what the people suffered under Spanish rule. But Lammet worried over it. She was afraid of the yellow fever during the present rainy season and also of the Spaniard, but of this

³ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

I have little fear. However, this would add to the excitement. The fever as well as the climate is a danger, but if one is called, these things are of little concern as it would be in God's hands. I think this was right, but I felt my duty was with Lammet and therefore I did not go. Had Clara been with her I would have been on my way to Cuba. My good friend Roosevelt is going there. He resigned his position in the Navy department to become a colonel in the "Rough Riders." We were like brothers and I was sad to let him go. Eddie tried to get into his regiment but he was nearsighted and the doctor said he would not be able to endure the tropical climate or the scrimmages in the rainy season. John tried to join the Navy. We all have the war fever. I can hardly control John. We miss Clara. I hope she will visit Ribe before she leaves but this I don't know. I have been in Washington since February and know little about my own family. I can get home in six hours, so it was not like going abroad. Well, little Emma. How is everything at the institute? Perhaps I can see you in your own surroundings next summer. Let us live and hope. We must try to get a stone on Father's grave. If not before we must see to it when I come home. Remember me to all the dear friends in the old town who always will be close to my heart. There I spent my youth and found my "Lam."

YOUR BROTHER JACOB

Emma! Will you see that Mother gets some "Forget-me-nots" for her birthday? The best ones grow near the brook in the meadows by the path to Farup.

Jacob Riis turned down the chance to go to war and remained at his post in New York, where he was needed as much, if not more.

2

Welfare organizations found their burden of relief somewhat decreased this year as a result of improved business conditions, but social workers still had plenty to do. There was more and more talk of prevention of social ills rather than cure; and in 1898, as a step toward such an end, the

Charity Organization Society organized a Tenement House Committee. Lawrence Veiller was made secretary, and a number of other well-known persons, including Riis, became members. Promptly getting under way, the Committee took stock of the accomplishments of the past few years, particularly from 1894 to 1898. During that time much had been done to put the matter of housing before the public, and, as will be remembered, several definite steps had been taken. The Gilder Commission recommendations had resulted in the 1895 housing laws; the Health Department, instigated by men like Roosevelt and Riis, had succeeded in razing many old tenements; a City and Suburban Homes Company had been formed as a result of conferences held on March 3 and March 4, 1896, by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. But every reformer wished that the day might come when all the old slum buildings could be torn down, and the Tenement House Committee never lost sight of this objective.

During the first six months they framed a series of tenement-house ordinances intended to supplement the existing laws embodied in the future Greater New York City charter, but were unable to get the authorities to adopt them. The first two years after its formation the committee spent largely in preparing a comprehensive exhibit known as the "Tenement House Exhibition of 1900," in which "poverty" maps and "disease" maps were a feature. Partly as a result of this exhibition, a bill was introduced in the legislature in 1900 authorizing the appointment of a Tenement House Commission.⁴ The bill was passed, and a commission was appointed. Robert W. deForest was made chairman and Lawrence Veiller secretary.

⁴ The Mayor authorized the Commission on April 4th and it was approved by Governor Roosevelt on April 16, 1900.

Riis attended the Committee meetings regularly. Veiller, a wiry and energetic man himself, was much entertained by the personality of Riis whom he characterized as a "romantic, honest, imaginative, unscientific, intense, exuberant person who would cheer his fellow committee members with his hearty, loud laugh."⁵ Riis had, says Mr. Veiller, a singular power to dramatize, and for this reason particularly he was of great help to the committee. Sometimes he would exaggerate, as for instance when he told the story of a big tenement-house fire. The tenants were marooned on top of the building. It was a spectacular moment, and Riis wrote, "Even the engines stopped pumping."⁶ When told of this exaggeration, he waved it aside as unimportant. At the meetings Riis did not dominate the discussion, but offered suggestions; and despite occasional arguments over the comparative values of the work of the Gilder Commission and the Tenement House Committee, Riis and Veiller were friendly in a common cause.

3

In a few months the Spanish War was over, and in September Colonel Theodore Roosevelt returned home in a burst of glory. This was the psychological moment to nominate him for the governorship of New York, and after a brief period of reflection he consented to run.

The faithful Riis was in the seventh heaven of delight, not only because of the honor to Roosevelt, but also because he knew that with Roosevelt as governor there would be a good chance of putting through reform legislation⁷ on the subject of housing, sweat-shop labor, and a

⁵ Writer's interview with Mr. Lawrence Veiller, Oct. 6, 1933.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ T. Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt, An Autobiography* (New York, 1913), p. 313.

number of other problems of the same general character. Riis had spent his vacation at the Tracys' camp in the Parry Sound district of Ontario. He returned, refreshed and enthusiastic, to help in the campaign. On October 12, 1898, he wrote to Mr. Gilder: "I am going on the stump for Roosevelt to stay there until Election Day. This is the duty just now, as I see it. I am going right out now to talk it over with him. When I come back I will come in and see you (tomorrow)...."⁸

It was a breezy campaign with the Rough Rider making a round of speeches⁹ which were enthusiastically applauded. He had behind him Boss Platt, Republican leader of the state, as well as the independent organizations of New York City; and on November 8th he was elected. Now for action, thought the jubilant Riis.

With vivid recollections of working conditions in the tenement districts of New York, Roosevelt desired to obtain facts which he could present to the legislature as soon as he became governor. He asked Riis to help him, and Riis eagerly undertook to do so.

4

The year 1898 now drawing to a close had brought Riis a tremendous feeling of satisfaction. While he had refrained from going to war and had thus missed the excitement of a correspondent's job, he had delighted in the progress made in local reform, and he was rejoicing over the prospect of seeing Roosevelt take his oath as governor. All through the year he had kept up a steady flow of writing. In a letter to the editor, which appeared in the *Evening Sun* on December 3rd, he deplored the conduct

⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, Oct. 12, 1898 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

⁹ T. C. Platt, *The Autobiography of Thomas Collier Platt* (New York, 1910), pp. 353, 366, 373; also newspapers of the day.

of the Police Department in the new administration. Again, on December 17th, the *Evening Sun* gave two and one-fourth columns to a signed article by him of which the headlines read: "Police Force Demoralized. . . District Leader, Not Chief, Runs the Department. . . Patrolmen Are Lax in the Performance of Duties, Since Their Standing Depends Upon Political Pull, Not Efficiency. . . Inside History of McCulloch's Retirement." During the past few months, besides doing regular reporting for the *Evening Sun*, he had written several magazine articles, among them "The Story of the New York Newsboy" and "Roosevelt and His Men" for *The Outlook*.¹⁰ His friend Mr. Gilder had suggested that he try to put a light touch here and there in his writing, and he replied,¹¹ "The brightness comes from the children and I will seek it there. The matter that comes to me naturally is tragedy." Perhaps there is something in his words to justify the common impression that the Dane has a note of melancholy in his nature—or was Riis's point of view the result rather of experience in the New York slums than of so-called Danish temperament? However that may be, he set to work to apply Mr. Gilder's suggestion in the pages of the little book of short stories, *Out of Mulberry Street*, which he sent to the publishers in the fall of this year.

For a long time he had considered writing the story of his life. Ardent patriot that he had become, he wanted to share with others whatever there was of inspiration in his career. Yet up to this time the events had seemed rather too personal, and he had put the matter off. Now, however,

¹⁰ He also wrote an introduction to Mrs. Lowell's article, "The Outdoor Recreation League," in *The Churchman*, July 16, 1898; a story, "The Passing of Cat Alley," for *The Century*, December, 1898, and an article, "The Police Department of New York," for *The Outlook*, Nov. 5, 1898.

¹¹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, Jan. 19, 1898 (R. W. Riis collection).

he felt differently. On December 12th he wrote to Mr. Gilder:¹²

DEAR MR. GILDER:

The boy whose story I should like to write when I get through with my *Atlantic* contract . . . is your friend Jake Riis. I have often—or several times—been asked to do this and have always refused. I was too close to it all. But some years ago I made up my mind that I would write when the new century had begun and the old with all its belongings was but a memory. Somehow that seems to erect a fence on the side of which I can speak freely, even of myself.

My idea was that this should run through many months, as far as it would naturally go, telling truly what was, with only the names changed. I think there would be interest enough in it, for, much oftener than you think, the experiences I draw upon are my own. It is possible now to tell the *whole* story—and it might be interesting to discover the far back springs of the action that finally removed the disgraceful police lodging houses and made me fight all those years for light in the Mulberry Bend. I hated those dens with reason.

There is abundance of "slum" in that story, and not only in the city. If that appeals to you, I shall chalk it down. That and a story about my own children whose doings I have observed with that purpose in many years, are the things I want to do, if I have the health and strength (when I shall have shaken off the *Atlantic*). First of all, however, I want to write for the Century the story of Hamlet's Old Castle, for which I have all the material lying ready now, pictures and all— But that also must wait upon the *Atlantic*, may the mischief take it—I have promised.

Ever yours,
JACOB A. RIIS

As he sat down to map out the chapters of the autobiography, he realized that he wished it to serve two purposes. The book should acquaint the public with reform

¹² R. W. Riis collection.

movements in which he had participated, but it was also to be a labor of love in which was unfolded the romantic tale of a plain young carpenter who, surmounting all handicaps, had won the princess and "lived happily ever after."

Any one visiting Jake Riis's home about this time would have found the older children almost adults. Ed was a quiet young fellow, who had ability in writing and expected to do newspaper work. Clara, home from Denmark, was great company for her mother. Already she was thinking of romance and marriage; yet she was still a child in many ways. One day she amused her father by announcing that she must give up something during Lent and that she had decided to "give up her tonic." John, the second son, was a half-grown lad now—he, too, became a newspaper man in later years.

As for Katie, she was an endless source of amusement to her father. Sometimes she would bring the cats into the parlor and discuss their frailties. Occasionally there were quarrels which led her to think of extreme measures! Thus on January 28, 1899, she wrote a note which Mr. Riis preserved among his treasures: ¹⁸

When Katie decided to Quit

She left this letter . . . "Mrs. Riis: I will not stand be called selfish. I wish you were in place, then you could see how you like it. Mary is so mean to me. I am going away and I am not coming back again. I have tried to be a good little girl but it is not possible as long as the boys are here. It will be better when I am out of the way. If now you think so too.

KATIE

And five-year-old Vivi was always surprising them with some quaint remark. How Riis did chuckle over this small boy!

¹⁸ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

301 *Mulberry St.*¹⁴

April 3, 1899

MY DEAR MR. GILDER:

This is to make formal application on behalf of my son William (aged 5) for the hand of your daughter Pussy. The provocation is this:

Yesterday Vivi came in from his play and sat down alone, counting his buttons with entire absorption. "I guess I will see," he said to his mother, "if Pussy loves me."

He counted gravely down and then drew a sigh with contented face.

"Yes, she does," he said, "I know she does, for I stopped at yes."

By which I recognize the need of speaking in season. It is a family trait never to give up, and never to have more than one love. Is Pussy's hand promised already, or is there hope?

How are you, anyhow? I shall come in and see you when I have the Italian M.S. in a few days. I want to see the family too, before you go to your happy hunting grounds in the Tyingham Valley of blessed memory

Ever your
JACOB A. RIIS

Uniting the different personalities in their home moved the busy mother. She had a servant to help her, but even so she had a multitude of household tasks. Nevertheless she found time to devote to the separate interests of the children, and she had a delightful sense of humor in dealing with young adolescents. She had become intensely loyal to America, but there was always much of the old world about her that expressed itself in little things. She often sang Danish hymns as she went about her work, and she tenderly dusted the pictures of the old country that hung on the walls. In her heart was the cherished, if somewhat painful, memory of her girlhood in Ribe. She was a quiet and lovely companion for her husband.

¹⁴ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

CHAPTER XIV

Home to Denmark; An American Is Made

I

ON January 1, 1899, Theodore Roosevelt raised his hand and took the oath of office as Governor of New York State. The job entailed many new responsibilities, for he had pledged himself to a program of social reform and there would probably be much opposition to overcome. He was genuinely interested in trying to relieve tenement conditions and regulate sweat-shop labor; he believed in an eight-hour day for the working-men. He was determined, if possible, to eradicate by law the evils which he had seen at first hand back in the old Mulberry Street days.

The energetic beginning soon made by the new Governor was a favorite topic in New York City. Tongues wagged at a great rate. How soon would Roosevelt call for investigations that would result in the much-needed social legislation? What pitfalls would be dug for him by his political enemies? Would he use this position as a stepping-stone to higher office? On and on went the questions. Hardly had he begun to put the clamps down when there were those who said that in the next campaign he would be side-tracked into the "graveyard" office of vice-president, where he would be neatly out of the way.

Jacob Riis had unbounded faith in the career of his friend and was only too eager to supply any facts about

slum conditions that would help Roosevelt to get results.¹ At the latter's request he investigated a complaint made by Herman Robinson of the United Brotherhood of Tailors charging that in many sweat-shops working hours exceeded the limits fixed by the law. (The legal maximum was ten hours a day, sixty hours a week, and women under twenty-one and boys under eighteen were not permitted to work after 9 P.M.) Many shops were unsanitary and the factory inspectors indifferent, it was claimed. By appointment Riis met Mr. Robinson and S. H. Jacobson and the three factory inspectors involved, and they visited the places in question. On March 21, 1899, he submitted his report to the governor: ²

1. That more factory inspectors are urgently needed in this city, the present force being wholly inadequate.
2. That night inspections are necessary to prevent the bosses from working their hands over-hours.
3. That the inspectors could, with advantage, invoke the authority of the Board of Health oftener than they do, and save time and much effort.

Again Riis was appointed by Roosevelt to inquire into the conditions of drug clerks with a view to ascertaining the extent of approval or disapproval of the Shorter Hours' bill then pending. Riis inserted a notice in the paper attracting the attention of interested clerks and conducted some interviews.³

With Roosevelt in the governor's chair, Riis felt that he had a place to go to for help when things were troubling him. For example in February, 1899, his sympathies were

¹ On June 1, 1900, the *New York World* reported, "J. B. Reynolds of the Tenement House Commission and Jacob A. Riis...met Governor Roosevelt...by appointment....Twenty tenement houses were visited...."

² Copy of Riis's report (Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library).

³ *The World*, May 21, 1899.

stirred by the fact that a woman, Mrs. Martha Place, had been condemned to die for murder. To Riis it seemed a pathetic situation, and, urged on by some persons who had interested themselves in the case, he asked his friend to save the woman's life. But Roosevelt was not willing to alter the decision of the court, feeling that justice had been done.⁴

On another occasion Riis interceded in behalf of a policeman who had been sentenced to Sing Sing for shooting a boy who was playing football in the street. Roosevelt's letter written on December 31, 1899, brought the news that Riis's request had been granted as "a New Year's gift."

While Roosevelt was Governor he went with Riis on a tour of the tenement-house sweat-shops in New York City. Riis tells of the occasion: ⁵

/ I shall not soon forget that trip...it was on one of the hottest days of early summer, and it wore me completely out though I was used to it...I had picked twenty five-story tenements, and we went through them from cellar to roof, examining every room and the people we found there....

On their rounds they entered an Italian flat where they saw an aged grandmother and a little girl in a dingy room. The child was dressed for confirmation with flowers and veil and the grandmother was pronouncing a benediction. Roosevelt asked the interpreter to tell the old lady that he was glad he had come, and after Roosevelt and Riis had departed, Riis "sneaked back" to tell them that the visitor was T. R.⁶

⁴ J. B. Bishop, *Theodore Roosevelt and His Time* (New York, 1920), Vol. I, p. 118.

⁵ J. A. Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (New York, 1904), p. 217. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 345-346.

2

In the local scene we can, by looking around, find Tammany entrenched in the municipal buildings during that year 1899. All was not peaceful for the Tiger, however. Indignant citizens pointed out that the Police Department was as corrupt as it had been before the Lexow Investigation, and complained that a monopoly in the shape of an ice trust was being encouraged by certain city officials. So serious were the charges against the Police Department that the matter was laid before the legislature and a new inquiry was undertaken, this time by the Mazet Committee,⁷ appointed by the Assembly. A feature of this investigation was the testimony given by Richard Croker, who consented to appear as a witness.⁸ In a startlingly frank statement he said, "We are giving the people pure organization government. . . . I am working for my pocket all the time." Evidence from the other witnesses proved the charges regarding corruption in the Police and Fire Departments. It was found that organization politicians kept up the price of ice by joining with the "ice trust." Moreover, it was revealed that judgeships were for sale at from \$10,000 to \$25,000 according to the position.

The investigation was naturally not without political implications. The Democrats, replying to the attack on Croker, wanted to know why Tom Platt, the Republican boss of New York State, was not also being questioned. And so the charges and countercharges went on for some months. In the end the only notable person removed from office was Asa Bird Gardiner, the Tammany District At-

⁷ *Report of the Special Committee of the New York Assembly to Investigate the Public Offices and Departments of the City of New York*, etc., 5 Vols. Mazet Investigation.

⁸ *Ibid.* and *Dictionary of American Biography*: "Richard Croker."

torney. On the whole, this investigation was less violent than the Lexow in immediate results, but the sentiment aroused was sufficient to turn many voters against Tammany. In November, 1901, Seth Low was elected mayor on a reform ticket, and William Travers Jerome, one of the lawyers for the Lexow Committee, was elected District Attorney.

But, in 1899, the reformers could not foresee the events of the next two or three years; they were disappointed with the outcome of the Mazet Inquiry. Excitement in Mulberry Street died down, and many a citizen shrugged his shoulders and said good government in New York City was an impossibility. Riis did not take such a pessimistic view. He was outspoken in his charges against Tammany, but he was cheered by the thought that Roosevelt was Governor and would probably help to get legislation for social reform even if the present city officials remained in power.

Quite apart from the political situation in New York were numerous developments in the direction of a more satisfying cultural life. Educators were thinking in terms of new curricula to meet the needs of the individual. In 1899 Professor John Dewey published his book *The School and Society*, in which he forecast the rôle of to-morrow's educational institution. Vocational training came in for some consideration, and the adult-education movement gained headway. At the same time there was a widespread interest in social science and in similar topics, but opportunity was as yet limited for the man who could pay only a moderate sum to learn. In an effort to meet the popular need, a group of citizens came together to formulate plans for the establishment of a number of people's clubs which should serve the double purpose of offering lecture courses to the studious and furnishing a suitable meeting place

for those who sought sociability. Riis was one of the originators of the plan; others were Ernest Crosby, Sam Donnelly, Edward King, Michael Raphael, Jacob Schiff, E. R. A. Seligman, Isaac Seligman, J. W. Sullivan, Leland Wall, Charles W. Warior, Felix Adler, Robert Fulton Cutting, Grace H. Dodge, Abram S. Hewitt, and Charles Sprague Smith. On Sunday evening, February 5, 1899,⁹ the inaugural meeting was held at Cooper Union and the idea was pronounced a success. Riis was one of the speakers on this occasion, and was also made a member of the Advisory Council.

3

With the approach of spring Riis's plans for a trip to Denmark took definite shape. He wanted to gather some material for articles which he had agreed to write on Danish topics. By July his plans were complete and he was ready to go. On July 7th he wrote to Mr. Gilder:¹⁰ "I have promised *The Churchman* to write for them the story about the Royal picnic ground in the woods at Elsinore. . . . I shall try my hand for *The Century* on the other four subjects I mention: The Dunes on the *North Sea*, *Hamlet's Old Castle*, *The Heath*, and the *farmers* of Denmark. . . ." ¹¹ A short time before his departure he was delighted to receive a general letter of introduction from Theodore Roosevelt. It was engraved on parchment, signed by the Governor, attested by his Secretary, and stamped with the seal of state. The message described Riis in glow-

⁹ Riis Papers, Russell Sage Library. Mr. Riis tells of how the group of men met in Abram S. Hewitt's study and planned to found this new center of popular education. He said Charles Sprague Smith showed great vision. J. A. Riis, "The People's Institute of New York," *The Century*, LXXIX (April, 1910), pp. 850-863.

¹⁰ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection). Letter, July 7, 1899.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² New York *World-Telegram* reference clipping.

ing terms as a useful citizen.¹² He tucked the imposing document away most carefully in his pocket and later on had it framed as one of his most prized possessions.

On the ship going over he chuckled when he found that one of his fellow passengers was a member of a graveyard firm which had opposed the removal of the old Mott Street barracks. Here was a big opportunity! He made a point of reciting the horrors of the dingy old buildings so that his acquaintance could hear, and the latter sank lower into his seat in a near-by deck chair!

Ribe again! The puffy little train pulled up at the station, and as he stepped down from the platform, a handful of his old friends raised a hearty cry of welcome. Home was the same as ever—yet how different! A familiar face was gone; his father had slipped into the shadowy paths of memory. But his mother, Emma, and Sofie, killed the fatted calf for him! ¹³

It was good to be in the quiet little town with the rush of affairs so far away as to seem almost a dream. He was tired, and his weary body would need a long time to rest. But invitations were showered upon him; friends in the island wanted to see him, and he was anxious to visit them all.

In the course of his stay in Denmark he saw the King. With quiet ceremony Riis was ushered in to pay his respects. He had carefully studied up the etiquette appropriate for the occasion; but one look at the tired, kindly old gentleman and he forgot all ceremony and stepped forward to shake King Christian's hand. The latter listened attentively to what Riis had to say about America and the work for betterment under way there. When the

¹² J. A. Riis, "When I Went Home to Mother," *The Churchman*, March 3 (1900), pp. 265-271; J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York, 1901), pp. 421-443.

interview was over, Riis started to go out with due formality; but, turning, he saw the old gentleman's tired smile; and again he forgot form, strode forward, and shook the sympathetic hand. It was the last time he was to see King Christian.

At Elsinore he was stricken with malaria, and for weeks he lingered there ill and depressed¹⁴ far away from his wife and children. One day while he was convalescent, he looked out across the water and saw a boat headed for the United States. Then, for the first time, he realized that America was truly his home; his wife and children and his work were there. Denmark would from now on be the dear land of his past.¹⁵

He could scarcely wait to get well before sailing back to America. A thousand things that he wanted to do crowded into his mind—books, articles, lectures, newspaper work, committee business. His weak, fever-ridden legs would hardly bear him up when he planned this vigorous future.

In his account-book, "the mystery," he wrote the rueful comment:

On July 15 I went to Denmark and fell ill there. Returned still ill, October 13. Thank God I am home again.

The trip and the keep of the family at home took the \$1000 I had had away in bank, and I came home with my last cent gone. All the articles I was to write for the *Century* and the *Churchman* about Denmark were for the time knocked into Smithereens. They were to have paid back the \$1000. Well, we'll have to begin over again— But it doesn't go quite as glibly as it did—not yet. However, we will get over that too, please God.

I shall not attempt to carry out account for the remainder

¹⁴ He was also a patient at the Commune Hospital, Copenhagen. J. A. Riis, "A Word About the Man," *McClure's*, XX (Feb. 1903), p. 360.

¹⁵ J. A. Riis, *The Making of an American*, p. 443.

of the year, for I don't know how. I shall only note on the opposite page my receipts, and when the money is gone shall know that none of it has gone for unnecessary things.

God bless "the Lamb."

To his sister Emma he wrote a Christmas letter on December 9, 1899¹⁶

... This is a special letter for Christmas and to thank you for the beautiful present Norge got to me from you... it hangs on the wall in our bedroom that gets the most light and not a day passes but that I rejoice over the beautiful picture of our old church... the most beautiful church I have ever seen... I am going to send you five Kroner or so as you think best... I would so like to keep him in a little comfort money from now on. We were confirmed together and I feel sort of responsible for him... it will bring me great joy...

Looking back over the past few months, Riis recalled numerous magazine articles which he had written, among them four for *The Century*. The names suggest the picturesqueness which he found in the slums—"The Passing of 'Cat Alley,' " "The Last of the Mulberry Street Barons," "Jim," "Feast Days in Little Italy."¹⁷ In the first of these articles he told about the miserable conditions in an alley; in that drab environment some children had shown their affection for old Mrs. Walsh on her way to Potter's Field by bringing some daisies. In the second article he told of how, as a reporter, he had discovered seventeen cases of trichinosis, all out of one ham which a family had eaten. The last of the articles, "Feast Days in Little Italy," was a picturesque account of the congested Italian district.

¹⁶ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

¹⁷ More complete information in bibliography.

CHAPTER XV

Turn of the Century; Riis's Little Office

I

THE turn of the century found Riis a man of fifty-one with a stout-appearing frame which belied the illness from which he had not yet recovered. His near-sighted eyes required the constant use of spectacles; his gray hair was matched by a drooping gray mustache. In his eyes there was the look of one who has vision of the future. A humorous smile often played about his mouth, but the lips would set in grim determination when he heard of some wrong which he felt should be righted. He was a man quick to love; but he could also hate with righteous wrath when he saw injustice. Occasionally he would wear a chip on his shoulder; but it was soon flicked off.

A reporter for the New York *World* wrote a story about Riis on February 8, 1900, under the title "Jacob Riis, An Easy Mark":

Riis's quaint little office opposite Police Headquarters is the Mecca of a constant procession of visitors. They range from the most prominent professional and political citizens to humble East-Siders who are grateful for the author's interest. These callers include many who on one pretext or another are seeking a little "temporary aid...."

His daughter Kate gives an account of him as he sat in his little office at the end of the lawn:

It was his retreat from the houseful of noisy, boisterous children. They simply would not give him the quiet he needed for his work. I can see yet the broad window that faced the house and the glow of the student lamp, which shone out and seemed to envelop Father's head like a halo, as he sat there, busily writing long into the night. And one reason for that office, too... was the constantly ringing telephone. So many needlessly demanded to speak with Mr. Riis and something had to be done... a private line connected the house and office, and for any urgent call he was quickly summoned.¹

This daughter also wrote in later years about her father's delight in the flowers and shrubs about the place:

...The garden in Richmond Hill was always a thing of beauty, and he worked in it and fussed over it constantly. When his pen would not do simply what he wanted it to do, and his thoughts just wouldn't seem to come right, he would leave his writing for a little while, and go out in his garden and plant or transplant some treasured things, getting his hand right down into the good earth. Then, he told me, after a bit everything would straighten out and he would go back and write as he desired.²

While Riis had been lecturing for more than a decade, he was to develop this work on a much wider scale during the next few years. He received many invitations to lecture, obtained other engagements either through his own efforts or through such bureaus as Pond's, Redpath, and Lyceum.³ The sums paid him varied, being sometimes as high as a hundred and fifty dollars. Often in the course of his lectures he spoke in behalf of King's Daughters Settlement House and succeeded in raising money for its support.

He arranged his lectures in careful order, wrote them

¹ Letter from Mrs. Kathryn Riis Owre to writer, Dec. 6, 1934.

² *Ibid.*

³ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

down, and underlined the words which he wished to emphasize.⁴ At the proper point he would introduce, for dramatic effect, an appealing little story of some East-Side child suffering from neglect. Again he would project a picture with his lantern outfit to show a disreputable murderers' alley in the heart of the slums. A naturally gifted speaker, he was as much at home on the platform as in his Mulberry Street office. He always retained a good deal of the Danish accent, but his English was fluent and agreeable. One of his favorite subjects⁵ was "The Battle With the Slum"; in this lecture he told of the work done for reform in the 1880's and 1890's. Another title was "Tony," Tony being the typical boy of the streets in whose behalf he demonstrated the necessity of humane effort and thoughtful planning. A third popular topic was "True Americans"; here he stressed the patriotic duty of providing adequate care for the underprivileged.

Some of his experiences as lecturer on the road are amusing. On the drafty trains he was apt to find that some loquacious person had recognized him.⁶ He managed to take a nap during long day journeys, so that he arrived at his destination refreshed. Sometimes in order to reach the place where his audience was waiting for him, he had to slip and slide down long icy hills, or ride, half-frozen, over some rough country road. Again, he was met at the station by a committee of important officials, and escorted with due honors to the Opera House or Town Hall.

In order to carry the heavy lecture program he naturally had to relegate much of his newspaper work to Max Fischel. Then, too, he had not recovered from his illness

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Letter to Dr. Robbins dated January 18 (n. y.) (Dr. Jane E. Robbins' collection).

of the previous summer, and he realized that from now on he would have to give less time to his reporting.⁷ After 1900 he wrote little for the papers except occasional letters and interviews.

While he continued active in numerous reform movements of the city, such as the movements for better housing, for the control of sweat-shops, for the provision of more parks and playgrounds, Riis's usefulness now extended into a much wider field through his lectures, his writings, and his contacts with Theodore Roosevelt. This does not mean that he was in any sense forgotten in Mulberry Street. Far from it, for his energetic step could be heard as usual on the tenement stair. There was merely a shift in emphasis.

New York's social-reform movements were no longer of a simple character. Within a span of ten years, Riis had watched them grow into an almost incomprehensible network of activities. Whereas the attack on poverty, crime, and disease had in the early nineties consisted largely in remedial efforts, the stress was now placed upon preventive and constructive work. Many new organizations were springing up to help carry the burden. Then, too, older philanthropic organizations, churches, clubs, settlements, and the like had broadened their work so that there was an intricate pattern of coöperation, as well as much overlapping.⁸

The reader will recall that the years from 1902 to 1908

⁷ Information as to the exact date when he left the *Evening Sun* is not available. It was about 1901. The *Evening Sun* has only its 1903 ledger left, with records that far back. According to that, Mr. Riis was not on the staff in Aug., 1903 (Mr. Drennan of *The Sun*, March 9, 1934).

⁸ Mr. Riis outlines some of this development in *A Ten Years' War* (Boston, 1900). Other valuable sources of information are H. U. Faulkner's *The Quest for Social Justice: A History of American Life*, Vol. XI (New York, 1931) and the annual *National Conference of Charities and Correction Proceedings*.

constituted the famous "muck-raking" era, when reformers like Lincoln Steffens, with his book on *The Shame of the Cities*, and Ida M. Tarbell, with her articles in *McClure's* on the Standard Oil Trust, were exposing basic evils of municipal and industrial life. The period from 1900 to 1910 saw, too, a tremendous growth in trade unionism and in legislation for child-labor reform, workmen's compensation, and more adequate control of factory and sweat-shop conditions. Moreover, tenement-house commissions were appointed in many cities, the playground movement—so long retarded—now blossomed forth, and parks began to dot the brick and mortar of hundreds of cities all over the country. Health programs, too, such as the work for the prevention of tuberculosis, expanded their scope until they embraced many of the principles which the reformers of the 1890's had stood for.⁹

So complex did the new social program become that the good old days of the nineties seemed almost naïve by contrast. Riis, along with the others, was aware of the new day; but he was still so enthusiastic over the great changes of the previous decade that he continued to tell the public about them at the risk of being called old-fashioned and a "back number." He did, however, keep his facts up to date so that he was frequently consulted as an authority on current conditions.

2

In the first years of the new century Jacob Riis's personal life went on without any marked change. He was not well; he found it hard to get back his strength after the illness of the summer before. His worry over his own physical condition was increased when news came that his

⁹ H. U. Faulkner, *The Quest for Social Justice and National Conference of Charities and Correction Proceedings*.

mother was seriously ill.¹⁰ Knowing that her resources were very limited, he immediately sent money for the doctor's bills; he was relieved later in the spring to learn that she was better. There were happy days, of course, as well as sad ones, and he could still throw back his head and laugh when something funny happened in the middle of a gloomy morning.

In the spring of 1900 an important event was drawing near.¹¹ Clara was engaged to Dr. William C. Fiske of Richmond Hill, and they were to be married on June 1st at the Church of the Resurrection. Mrs. Riis entered into the spirit of the occasion. With her old-world love of romance and a natural sentiment for the little things that mean so much at such a time, she was busy for weeks helping her daughter get ready. Jake Riis, on the other hand, had somewhat mixed feelings; he was a little non-plussed by all the fixings, and, moreover, there was probably a little of the father's jealousy at sharing this oldest daughter with a son-in-law. On the day of the wedding, however, he was very proud of the lovely young bride.

After the ceremony at the church came the reception at the house. A hundred guests filled the downstairs rooms at 524 North Beech Street. Roosevelt was there to shake hands with the bride and groom; Dr. Jane E. Robbins,¹² Miss Lillian D. Wald, and others journeyed out from New York to wish them well. Mrs. Riis was in a flurry of excitement; but she, too, was sad that night. After all the guests had gone, he comforted her.

¹⁰ His letter to his sister (Dan-America Museum).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Interview with Dr. Robbins, fall, 1933.

3

Riis's physical condition appeared to grow worse instead of better. He was subject to attacks which he thought were due to indigestion. Usually he was too busy at lunch time to do more than snatch a hasty bite, and he was attributing his illness to the quickly swallowed meals. Dr. Tracy had told him long ago that he was smoking too much; but even when he cut down the number of cigars, he still suffered violent attacks of pain. One day he had an attack in the street. This made him realize that there must be some fundamental trouble, and he went to the doctor. He was told that he had angina pectoris. What this discovery meant to the active, life-loving man can well be imagined.

New York, Saturday June 23, 1900

MY DEAR DOCTOR:

The place for which I was headed at the beginning of this week is certainly free from malarial germs. I sincerely hope so. Else our hope of a life after this were scarcely worth entertaining. I was stricken down in the street last week, after a meeting with the Tenement House, by an attack of angina pectoris, and so the mystery was solved of the barrier (physical) that has seemed to oppose my every effort in the last year. We can see the end of it now. Though the roadway be spun out, we know to a certainty where it stops. . . .

How I wish you would come out to see me sometime. . . . Will you come out? Don't believe you will find me moping. I am not made that way. Even if I am to be shelved, I shall not kick. I see the Roosevelt day dawning and I'm content. Meanwhile, I haven't surrendered yet, and haven't thought of it. There is surely a little string somewhere in the grand orchestra which I can reach and pick with my pen, if I can't beat the bass drum. . . .¹³

¹³ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins, June 23, 1900 (Dr. Robbins' collection).

Riis made up his mind that if he had to die, he would go while in harness with a wave of the hand. In the meantime he would take whatever measures were necessary to safeguard his health; and he gladly accepted the usual invitation from Dr. Tracy to rest at the camp in Canada. Apparently the fresh air was invigorating and he soon felt more like himself, and could write a cheerful letter. For example, he wrote to Dr. Robbins:

... I think I have recovered. Only when I get excited for any cause, or out of breath, do I feel a reminder of my trouble. The latter alarms me a lot. I so want to fill the lecture contracts made for me for the winter lest the agents suffer loss. Also to pay back Major Pond; and I am just a little afraid I may find that hard. Still, I am going to try and do my very best, take things as they come. But for the rest I row, hunt, carry a 101½ pd. rifle through the roughest, rockiest woods I know of for half days, and suffer no inconvenience. I wouldn't have believed it six weeks ago ... and I have got over the fear of the thing coming on me alone...¹⁴

By a happy circumstance he received while at camp the message that King Christian IX of Denmark had conferred on him the Cross of the Order of Dannebrog. No material recognition that came Riis's way would ever supplant this little symbol in his affections. It represented to him his enduring tie with the history of his native land, and at the same time constituted a challenge to continue his work. Thus he returned from vacation in the camp of his friend with the knowledge that he would accept what fate had decreed; but there was a wistful look on his face sometimes, as he glanced around him in the dear home from which he might suddenly at any time be taken.

Something of his mastery over physical circumstance is ex-

¹⁴ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins, Sept. 3, 1900, from Lake Wahwashkesh, Canada (Dr. Robbins' collection).

pressed in the new volume which Riis sent to the publishers this year. It was called *A Ten Years' War* and was a triumphant account of "the battle with the slum." The dedication read: "To the faint hearted and those of little faith this volume is reproachfully inscribed by the author."¹⁵ The substance of the book was similar to that of *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Children of the Poor*, but it was a bolder work coming from the pen of a man who had become an authority on movements for reform. There were chapters on "The Battle With the Slum," "The Tenement House Slight," "The Tenement, the Genesis of the Gang," "Letting in the Light," "Justice for the Boy," and "Reform by Humane Touch." It was pointed out that in an eleven-year period, 35,844 fires had occurred in New York and that of these, 53.18 per cent had been in tenement-houses, although tenement-houses constituted only a little more than 31 per cent of all the buildings. In these fires 177 occupants had been killed, 523 maimed, 625 rescued by the firemen. Too often landlords had been protected by their Tammany friends. The tenement-house lighting problem was shown to be still acute. Only two years before, twelve thousand tenement halls were found to be unlighted, even at night; the Sanitary Police by repeated orders had brought the number down to less than one thousand in six months—but, Riis added, it was very doubtful whether the city still contained as many as a thousand¹⁶ tenements in which a light was kept burning. He described the old double-deck tenement again, and said that, according to the latest count (made in 1898) among the 40,958 tenements in New York, there were still 2,379 rear houses.

In other pages of the book he reviewed the work of the

¹⁵ By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.

¹⁶ J. A. Riis, *A Ten Years' War*, p. 44.

Good Government Clubs, described the model buildings that had been constructed (largely through the aid of Mrs. Alfred Corning Clark) on 68th and 69th Streets and told about the work of the City and Suburban Housing Corporation. After pointing to these hopeful signs, however, he declared: ¹⁷ "New York has still the worst housing system in the world. Eight-fifteenths of its people live in tenements not counting the better class of flats..." and he suggested that the City might limit the number of tenants in the old tenements, if it could not abolish the buildings themselves. He said that the suburban colonies undertaken by the Baron de Hirsch movement in New Jersey might be an important means of solving some of the problems presented by the Jewish element in the New York slums. Scoring the schools of New York for their reactionary program, he urged that they revise their curricula to turn out whole, sound children. He called attention to the fifty kindergartens which had been established within five years; and he predicted that schools "for discovering aptitude," ¹⁸ in line with Felix Adler's ideas, would before long be a reality. There was a hopeful note in this latest book. It carried the prophecy that in time the touch of human kindness would work the necessary changes for good.

4

Mulberry Street was all a-flutter in the fall of 1900. Many a heated discussion went on in the rooms of the old Police Headquarters, and in the newspaper office at 301, about the possibility of Roosevelt's coming in as vice-president, along with McKinley as president, on the Re-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 228. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

publican ticket. Feeling ran high among those who remembered the exciting days when "Haroun" strode the streets at midnight checking up on his neglectful staff. Many hoped to see Roosevelt voted into the inarticulate post at Washington. On the other hand, there were men like Riis who had such complete faith in Roosevelt's potentialities that they could not imagine his career being ended. So, for very different ends, Mulberry Street was going to cast its vote in favor of T. R.

Meanwhile, in the open stretches of the country, where people knew little of New York affairs, the Republican vote was sure to be swollen by popular enthusiasm for the Rough Rider. Big business too, would support McKinley and Roosevelt. Republican success was practically assured. Election Day rolled around with its banners and its dyed-in-the-wool politicians offering carriage rides to the polls; and in the evening the country strained its ears and eyes to find out who had won. Results were written in smiles on the faces of the Republicans, and Mulberry Street settled down to speculation over what would happen next.

One night, while echoes of the Election were still in the air, Riis and his friends, Dr. Edward T. Devine, Secretary of the Charity Organization Society, and Mr. John M. Glenn went to the home¹⁹ of Mrs. Corinne Robinson, Roosevelt's sister, to ask Roosevelt to speak at the coming 1901 meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Correction. When the three men arrived at the house, they found a crowd of reporters and politicians milling about the successful candidate. The outlook for a talk with Roosevelt seemed dim, but Mrs. Robinson, catching sight of them, led them quietly up the stairs to a sitting-room

¹⁹ Interview with Dr. E. T. Devine, July 28, 1933; letter from Mr. John M. Glenn, March 25, 1935.

and asked them to wait. By and by, Roosevelt came bouncing up the stairs. As he entered the door, he caught sight of Jake Riis—whereupon his broad smile flashed, and he began to sing at the top of his lungs the familiar song about the Scandinavian which they had so often sung together while walking arm in arm through the slums. With that rollicking start they all had a pleasant chat, and Roosevelt agreed to speak at the conference.²⁰

²⁰ Mr. Riis himself spoke at this conference on the subject, "A Blast of Cheer," showing the hopeful prospects for reform. (*Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, Washington, 1901.) "...Preserve me from the term 'laboratory work'! A human being in misery is not a bug to be stuck upon a pin for leisurely investigation and learned indexing..." he said (p. 24).

CHAPTER XVI

Silver Wedding; "The Making of an American"

I

TWENTY-FIVE years had slipped by since Riis had handed his young bride down the gang-plank of the steamer from Denmark to the shore of their new land. He could reach back and almost touch that magic moment, it seemed so near. And yet, as he thought it over, a quarter of a century was a long, long time; sometimes he felt quite old when he counted up the years! Now, on March 5th, they were to celebrate their silver wedding anniversary with a reception—nothing very elaborate, but a joyful occasion when friends and neighbors would come to share the simple hospitality of their home. They made out a list and had some invitations printed; but the white squares got whisked away in the mail so fast that to their chagrin there was not one left to send to the cherished friend, Mr. Gilder. Jake took care of that deficiency, however. On February 21st he wrote: ¹

... I was just about to send you a nice silver printed invitation to our Silver Wedding on March 5th, when lo, they were gone. My wife had carried off the last. Perhaps it was just as well. So, the formality of it is gone. You wouldn't care, anyhow, I suppose, for what with the river very full of ice and the house full of neighbors, you wouldn't have as good a time of it as I'd want. And so you needn't feel obliged to send me a present which I don't want. I don't want your silver; but I

¹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, Feb. 21, 1901 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

do want your friendship and affection. If on that day it comes into your head to send me a greeting by letter, why, I will be overjoyed, and so will my wife be. And if by any chance you want to trust yourself to the tender mercies of the East River and of yours truly, you know you and Mrs. Gilder would be more than welcome, if we do have to squeeze till we flatten all out.

With love to all at home, always yours,

JACOB A. RIIS

At the same time he posted a letter to his sister Emma telling her about the approaching festivity.²

... Well, dear Emma... when you receive this we shall be celebrating our Silver Wedding. Think what a long time; but to me as the flying wind, so short and yet shorter to be. It's a good thing it doesn't end here.

The other day I thought of Bishop Phillips Brooks who died here. When I walk by his house in Boston, I always wonder whether or not he is not more alive to us now than when he was on earth. All that we loved him for is still with us; it can never die. Who talks about life in the grave; that's all bluff.

Good-by, my dear. Live well until we meet again,

Your brother,

JACOB

March 5th came at last. In the early part of the afternoon Riis finished his tasks of writing and left to attend a meeting at the King's Daughters' Settlement House.³ At the door he noticed an unusual air of excitement. Board members smiled and chatted as they waited for the business to get under way. When the group had gathered together—there were some guests, including Paul Dana of *The Sun*—the meeting was called to order and necessary business transacted. Then Bishop Potter, the special

² Letter in Dan-America Museum.

³ *The Sun*, March 6, 1901.



Hudson Historical Bureau

MR. AND MRS. JACOB A. RIIS ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY OF THEIR WEDDING

speaker of the day, arose to address the meeting. "In the Name of God, and all his children," he began, "this house shall henceforth bear the name of Jacob A. Riis." There was a great round of applause, and when the many hands had ceased their clapping, the Bishop continued: "...I think we must admit that the conditions under which Mr. Riis has worked are, to say the least, unfelicitous. To think of a modern reporter as a philanthropist rather taxes the imagination. But he has touched, as only one in his profession can, the most distressing forms of human life and yet kept his optimism.... Mr. Riis has the mother heart as well as the father heart...." ⁴

Then it was Jake Riis's turn to speak, and it was characteristic of him that he took no notice of the compliments but took exception to Bishop Potter's reference to reporters "with all the warmth that the occasion permitted." He pointed out that "in twenty years his greatest encouragement had come through journalism and that he had developed a reverence for it." In conclusion he said: "...the world is not bad, it's good, thoroughly good. You simply have to touch it right." ⁵

That night Jacob and Elisabeth entertained in their white house on Beech Street. Old friends of many years came to shake hands with Jake and his beloved silver bride. He could turn often to look at her as she stood there beside him. She was as young and beautiful to him as on that day long ago when they had knelt at the altar. It was a perfect occasion, and it seemed to put the crowning touch to the story of his life.

Two days later he received a letter from Mrs. Lowell, who had been unable to attend the reception.

⁴ *New York Times*, March 6, 1901.

⁵ *Ibid.*

120 E. 30th St.
March 7/01

MY DEAR MR. RIIS:

That was a beautiful meeting, and I wish Mrs. Riis could have been there.

I only hope it did not upset you too much. How much your Mother will enjoy your account of it! Please give my love to Mrs. Riis and tell her it was owing to my daughter's being poorly that we could not go to the celebration, and we were very sorry.

March 5th is *my* day too—the day my husband and I were engaged. We had one anniversary of it—but none of our wedding-day. He was killed eleven days before our poor little daughter was born—and I was not twenty-one. So you must both be sorry for us.

I meant this for a business letter though! To tell you again how very much I am counting on having you speak for fifteen minutes on the afternoon of the 17th. Do try to. It is for the children—to save them from some of the evils that beset them.

Affectionately yours,
J. S. LOWELL⁶

Having put behind them the happy incident of their anniversary, Mr. and Mrs. Riis sometimes talked of the day, still some years hence, when Jacob could retire to write and to live a more quiet life with his family. They wanted to buy a small place in the country. Jacob wrote of this plan in a note to Mr. Gilder early in September, just before he left for his usual visit to the Tracy camp.

I go to Canada, but for the last time. I want to stay in the states hereafter. When I come back in October I am going to take my wife up to the Berkshire Hills which she loves, for a run around on purpose to find a home-site. I want a little place to keep one horse and one cow on, with a decent house and a brook and running water to drink—the brook to splash in, with willows hanging over . . . the kind of brook I fished in when I was a boy, with sun-fish and silver-fish in and the

⁶ Riis papers (Russell Sage Library).

water making whirls over the deep pools, you know. If you know of such a place up in the Berkshires, won't you tell me of it. . . . I want woods, too, with birds in—and not too many people around. . . . Please give my love to your folks, and believe me ever yours. . . .

Unfortunately their idea came to nothing because farmers in the region near the Gilders heard a rumor that the Riises and also Grover Cleveland were expecting to buy property and immediately set their prices beyond the Riises' ability to pay.

2

On September 6, 1901, President McKinley, while attending the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, was shot by an anarchist. For eight days he lingered at the point of death. Then he died and the whole nation mourned. Theodore Roosevelt was called from a vacation with his family to take the oath of office as President, and the grieving country took hope from the prospect of his energetic leadership. To a large number of citizens he represented the very embodiment of young America. He would surely find some way to meet the many diplomatic difficulties, particularly in the Canal region. He was notably liberal in his attitude toward reforms.

No man could have been more interested than Riis in Roosevelt's accession to the Presidency. He expressed complete confidence that nothing but good would come of it. Meanwhile close observers hazarded a guess that Riis might be called to Washington to serve on the official staff; and the rumor was strengthened some time later by a newspaper story to the effect that he would probably be offered the governorship of the Danish West Indies in case the United States acquired that territory.⁷ But, as has

⁷ *The Sun*, March 27, 1902.

been pointed out before, he was not interested in holding office, and probably he was right in steering clear of politics. He might have been very unhappy. As it was, he enjoyed watching the career of the new President, and incidentally derived much pleasure from being referred to as Roosevelt's friend.

In the meantime New York City affairs were hardly less engrossing than the developments at Washington. Ever since the disclosure of rottenness in city government which was made by the Mazet Inquiry in 1899, reformers had repeatedly urged a clean-up. In the fall of this year the Citizens' Union, an organization devoted to the cause of good government, took the leadership in a campaign to oust Tammany and make Seth Low Mayor.⁸ Aided by other organizations and individuals, it was successful, and once again the city could look forward to reform. To celebrate the victory and show appreciation of the efforts of leaders in the campaign, a dinner was arranged by the Merchants' Association for January 7th. Notable persons interested in municipal reform were slated to speak, among them Robert W. deForest on the tenement-house problem and Riis on "The Wage-Earning Voter."⁹

3

During the past few months Riis had completed work on the manuscript of *The Making of an American*, some of the chapters of which had appeared in the magazines. He dedicated the book simply "To Lammet." It was published in October. In it he told of his early struggles and reverses of the trying years as day laborer and tramp. He set forth in detail the horrors of his night at the police-

⁸ *Citizens' Union Campaign Scrap-book*, 1901 (New York Public Library).

⁹ *Ibid.*

station lodging-house. He described his early days as reporter, giving delightful anecdotes of his experiences. For instance, he told of how he had seen Grant, after his second term, meekly submit to a clubbing and to being ordered out of the fire-lines by a policeman. He described his happy days in Mulberry Street when Roosevelt was there as police commissioner and gave a vivid account of their midnight tours of inspection. He gave the details of his courtship and marriage and included a chapter written by his wife. At the end he told of the silver wedding, of Clara's marriage, and of his first grandchild clamoring to be held in his arms. Through the book ran a vein of delightful humor and intimacy. The pages glowed with an optimism which showed that Riis had conquered the adverse circumstances of his life and that he had no regrets.

While Riis wrote numerous books and articles during his career, *The Making of an American* and *How the Other Half Lives* proved to be the most popular. Some idea of the reception of *The Making of an American* may be gained from a few excerpts from reviews. In *The Nation*, December 12, 1901, we find the following:

... His labors have borne no small fruit in cleansing New York, and his reports on slum experiences have reached an audience far beyond the City. His later magazine articles are now gathered in an autobiography of frankness so singular as at once to invite and disarm criticism. . . . Pen and pencil here reveal the matters over which a veil is usually cast; but if the author has little regard for dignity or domestic privacy, the thorough goodness of a man, his naïve sincerity, his forceful disinterestedness command no less respect than his public services. . . . This is a typical American though born in Denmark—never idle, never discouraged, resourceful, unconquerable. . . . The best thing in a book is the artless picture of a strong and generous nature bringing forth fruit after its kind. . . .

Another reviewer, in *The Dial* (January 1, 1902), says:

... The most striking quality of his book is undoubtedly its artless frankness, which is at first in equal measure appalling and delightful. But before one has read far, he agrees unqualifiedly with that wise friend of Mr. Riis's who told him, when he was hesitating over the first chapters of his reminiscences, "to take the shortcut and put it all in" ... here is a man whose house of life has no back doors and no alley windows. The whole of Mr. Riis is in his book, then, and the real Mr. Riis. He is "speaking right on" in words that have no fictitious limelight glare about them and little of the grace of artful manipulation; but they are plain speaking words, whose charm is that they are instinct with the thrill and throb of life, with the joy of labor and the pathos of joy ...

The Independent (January 31, 1932) reviewed the book, under the title "A Social Worker's Autobiography" and said:

... What will prove its chief charm to some, though a regrettable defect to others, is the naïve frankness, the unconstrained freedom of the more personal revelations ... we shall not pass judgment. ... But something more questionable is the almost childish elation with which Mr. Riis records his victories over his fellow reporters and the police and relates his deeds making for social betterment. Nothing could be further from our wish than to detract in the slightest from the enduring merit of Mr. Riis's efforts for the wiping out of the slums. These efforts were nobly altruistic; they were carried on against heavy obstacles, with a courage and persistence that compel the warmest admiration. Nevertheless the account is somewhat overdone, and the personal share of credit claimed by him is rather unduly emphasized. When the history of the city's civic movements and their sequent results comes to be written it will be told in a different way.

There are instances, too, wherein Mr. Riis's judgment is badly at fault. The closing of the police lodging houses was not such an unmixed blessing as he imagines; unquestionably

it caused grievous suffering to the worthy as well as to the unworthy. The author's laudation of Mr. Roosevelt's speech to the labor men at Clarendon Hall is also unfortunate. Persons quite as earnest in the reform movement as was Mr. Riis considered the tone of that speech needlessly provocative; and it is an open secret that the views expressed therein were not the views of the Roosevelt of two years later, when he was elected to the governorship. Perhaps Mr. Riis is uninformed about a certain private conference, held in the early days of the campaign of 1898, between Mr. Roosevelt and a number of labor leaders, when the former expressed his changed convictions regarding labor and its organizations.

None of these specks, however, mar the general excellence of the book. It is, we repeat, a fascinating tale—a tale of love and work and hardships, of distressing vicissitudes, and of final rest and security in a pleasant haven.

It is, in the best sense, a "helpful" book; no man or woman can read it without being made thereby the stronger and better. . . . It is a book which encourages effort, both for ourselves and for others; and it fans into flame our smoldering faith that right is destined to win out in the end.

The Outlook had carried the chapters of the book and now wrote, under "Books of the Week" (December 14, 1901):

Nothing could be more superfluous than to describe this book to the readers of *The Outlook*. Whatever else may have been left unread, these chapters of a life made themselves read; and of this the editors have had overwhelming proof in letters innumerable, in press comment, and in many other ways. . . . One reason why they made lively as well as profitable reading is suggested in Mr. Riis's reply in his word of preface to some who have asked if these were made-up stories: "I am mighty glad they are not. I would not have missed being in it all for anything." It is this joyous optimism that gives the book life, humor, and purpose. . . . There is not a moan of self-pity; but there is a tremendous indignation against the wrongs of the poor and of the children. . . . The personal story, interesting and stirring in itself, is most of all interesting because it

shows how character grew and power to do things was gained by fighting the battles of those who needed aid. The history of the making of one American may well aid in making others. . . . Its ingenuousness is based in sincerity, its incidents are singularly varied and dramatic, its keynote is that of hopefulness and helpfulness. . . .

The *New York Times* carried a review of the book in its Saturday supplement on December 7, 1901. The reviewer writes:

. . . The eager and genial confidence with which Mr. Riis exposes his weaknesses sets forth also the dogged pluck, the indomitable optimism and the capacity for constancy and devotion which, with an almost colossal egotism—made up of equal parts of vanity and conceit—are the distinguishing characteristics of his latest book. . . .

Though Mr. Riis has been writing for many years he is in no sense a man of letters. The place he has made for himself is in American life, not in American literature. It is as the reformer, not as the artist, that he will eventually be remembered. We do not wish to imply that Mr. Riis is without power of presenting forcibly and vividly whatever he sees, or that he does not interest, but that it is what he writes, not how he writes, which gives his work value. His large and humane grasp of facts, his faculty for seeing all that is visible—not creative or even imaginative insight—have made him the figure that he is in the municipal history of New York. . . .

Though "The Making of an American" is inferior to "How the Other Half Lives," "A Ten Years' War" and "The Children of the Poor" it is interesting and not without valuable suggestions. The consideration of the necessity and feasibility of imbuing the emigrant, particularly the young emigrant, with a realization of his responsibilities as a citizen before according him the privileges of a voter is practical and sympathetic.

Apart from its value as a study of personality the book is of interest for the light it throws upon the problem of

social reform in New York in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

In a letter to Dr. Robbins from Brockton, Massachusetts, he refers to the criticisms of the book:

Yes, the *Times* was funny. Of course you can expect that when you write as I do and what I did and I do not mind it in the least. . . . If I did mind, the daily evidence I get from so many sides that the book had spoken to many hearts, as I hoped it might, would far outbalance the lack of approval of the few. What does it matter anyhow? I didn't write for them. . . .

And the same letter gives some information about the sales: "in three weeks, the publishers tell me it has run fairly out of two big editions, and a third is preparing. The State Librarian at Albany writes that it has been selected as one of the five books of the year to be printed for the *Blind*. THAT I value exceedingly. . . ."

And so, as Riis saw the last days of 1901 go by, he counted himself a fortunate man. His book was selling well and his other writings could net the family a comfortable living. His lectures were in demand, and he began to see his way clear to retire within a few years if all went well. True, he had to be careful of his health—some caution in this regard he owed to his family—but he had mastered the fear of sudden death and was able to pursue his activities without imposing a great many restrictions upon himself. Thus meditating, he pushed back his chair and went in search of the family. Vivi was trying to find out why they were "making such a fuss over Papa."

CHAPTER XVII

Riis "Wipes the Dew" Off His Spectacles

I

EARLY in January, 1902, he packed his bag and left to resume his lecture tour. An acquaintance who met him in Grand Central Station about this time gave a sprightly little account of an interview which he had with Riis as they paced up and down the mosaic floor while waiting for the train. Riis wore a pearl-colored derby pulled tightly over his head and his face flushed as he began to talk in a rapid flow of the many vital things in which he was interested. "He is not a large man, and quite suggestive of a little, compact dynamo, tightly wound with yards and yards of nerves, sympathetic for man, woman and child...."¹

During these next two or three months he went to New England, down through Pennsylvania, over to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa; and from there to Kentucky, and back through Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and into New England again. The little diary in his pocket was a kaleidoscopic picture of places and people.² Whenever he was in New York for a few days, he was busy meeting the many demands upon his time. The settlement needed money; and he regularly attended the board meetings where ways and means were considered. He also interviewed men and women of

¹ V. V. M. Beede, "A Little Talk with Jacob Riis," *The Sunday School Times*, July 5, 1902.

² Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

wealth whose aid he was able to enlist in raising money for the Riis House budget. Often he was able to bring good news on his return from a lecture trip:

... Who knows that I may come as a veritable Santa Claus?

Joking aside, can you manage to have a special meeting of the board which has to deal with property matters called for that evening....

Of course I would not trouble you unless I had something in my Santa Claus pack. Therefore, please ask them to come.

Also, please ask our lawyer to at once secure an option on the property to run them up and ask him to bind it legally so that we may have a firm basis. Let there be no failure to do this.

Please God, we shall keep our Christmas with lighter hearts as regards our house than we have yet had....³

Again he wrote to Mrs. Heath of the Settlement: "... Enclosed find Mr. Schiff's contribution *to the building fund*. It is for that purpose only. I wish again to emphasize my conviction that we must incur no larger debt than for the *two houses*. I personally can not consent to lift a heavier burden.... Isn't *Mr. Schiff good*.... I enclose another contribution of \$25. to the building fund. Put it with the rest...."⁴ He was one of the incorporators, on June 1, 1902, of the new Greenwich House, a settlement designed to preserve neighborhood ideals through the organizing of clubs and educational activities. Likewise he took time to answer inquiries from many persons seeking advice on various undertakings as may be seen from the following extract of a letter:

You have done just right in asking President B—— and Mr. Devine about the matter in hand. For the rest, just use common sense. There is a lot of theoretical balder dash that

³ Letter dated Dec. 8, 1902 (R. W. Riis collection).

⁴ Letter dated Dec. 18, 1902 (R. W. Riis collection).

bewilders people's minds. Certainly it is the business of the Board of Education to provide schools and no private effort that attempts to set up permanent coördinate lines and responsibilities is to be encouraged; but if there is a gap which you can fill with a kindergarten, why, fill it while it is there. . . . We are growing so prodigiously wise with all our sociological studies that we sometimes refuse the half loaf to urge the whole, forgetting that someone may starve meanwhile. . . . let us be glad that the mothers ask for it. They will be asking all the harder for their right of having their children provided with schooling for which they do not have to pay.

Luck betide you.⁵

Occasionally when a tribute was paid to him he was embarrassed. For instance, a young woman wrote some verses of praise. Riis was surprised that any one should want to write poems about him! Referring to the poetry he wrote to Mr. Gilder:

524 *Beech Street, North*

March 29, 1902

MY DEAR MR. GILDER:

There is some horrid mistake about all this. What have I done to have poems written about me. If they were about you, now! But the verses *are* beautiful and I wish you would tell the young lady so—and give her the enclosed letter. She is fine, I will bet.

Gosh! I wish I could write poems. But I couldn't even when I was so lovesick that I sat out in the yard with the dew falling on me and gazed at the midnight moon. If a fellow can't then, he never can, as well. It is all up there, isn't it? Dr. Bryant says I can't write English even. Tempt him, won't you, to get up behind you on Pegasus, sometime when you have the steed out for an airing and take a *fall* out of the doctor for the sake of yours ever

JACOB A. RIIS ⁶

⁵ Letter dated Aug. 6, 1902 (R. W. Riis collection).

⁶ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, March 29, 1902 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

2

After Roosevelt's inauguration, some time went by before the Riises accepted an invitation to visit at the White House. They did not wish to intrude during those early days when they knew Roosevelt was very busy. Eventually, however, they did go to Washington on a holiday trip that seemed almost like a second honeymoon. They were invited⁷ to dine with the President, and for the exciting occasion made their best appearance. Mrs. Riis wore her lovely "silver-wedding" dress, while he completed his preparations by pinning the Dannebrog Cross on the lapel of his coat. When they reached the White House, he noticed that no guest wore a decoration. He was embarrassed, and his enjoyment of the occasion might have been spoiled had not Roosevelt sensed the difficulty; in an undertone he thanked Riis for wearing the little symbol.

On August 27, 1902, Riis completed the manuscript for a new book, *The Battle with the Slum*. This work, dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt as a record of the battles which they had fought together, was intended to be a sequel to *How the Other Half Lives*. Some of the material had been printed in magazines or in his other books; but he brought his figures up to date. Regarding tenement conditions, he pointed out that in 1900, there were 44,850 tenements, of which 2,143 were in the rear. There had been a reduction of 236 between 1898 and 1900; but the battle was not yet won. He predicted deurbanization as one solution to the problem. In this book, as in *A Ten Years' War*, he once more struck at the Tammany organization as a deterrent to reform. Again he spoke in behalf of new schools, more playgrounds, recreation piers. He

⁷ J. A. Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (New York, 1904), pp. 281-282.

advocated that the practice of giving numbers instead of names to schools be stopped and that the authorities should name the buildings after great men as an inspiration to the young. While the book covered a survey of conditions and measures taken during the past two decades for tenement improvements, the emphasis lay upon the need for more adequate education as a means of fitting the young for a higher concept of citizenship.

This book did not receive the wide acclaim of *How the Other Half Lives* or *The Making of an American*, probably because the material was already familiar to a large number of readers. *The Dial*, in a review on February 16, 1903, said:

It is a fine book, but everybody knows that; and much of it has already appeared elsewhere and has become part of the make-up of the American mind. Mr. Riis did not propose to work alone. His cry is not "See what a fine thing I am doing!" but "See what is being done and can be done, and come take a hand!" It is the democratic ideal that everyone can help. . . . Mr. Riis does not claim to be a sociologist but the political outcome of his work is to enable every individual to take his proper place in the world's work—indeed, in the world's play also.

Two or three things are plain to every reader of "The Battle With the Slum"—one thing is that people of the slums do not have anything like a fair chance; another that they are capable of much improvement, given better conditions; third, that it does not do to wait on philanthropy for justice. These things are generally known in a vague way; but Mr. Riis makes them living realities.

Further along the reviewer sums up his opinion of the value of the book as follows:

It may be that Mr. Riis's style is rambling, and his sentences are occasionally obscure; it may be that he is not always quite fair to the things he does not understand; but his book is a

live book, full of human interest, and is the record of great things done. It will help to make things move, and that is what it was written for.

Riis's chatty letters kept his family in Denmark well posted as to what he was doing and thinking. He appears to have written most often to his sister Emma who shared the news of him with relatives and friends in the old town. Few of his letters to his mother seem to have been preserved; but here is one which he wrote to her on November 10, 1902:⁸

MY DEAR OWN MOTHER—

Now while I have a breathing space I am going to let you know that at least I am alive. We are all well but God only can help us if we don't get any coal, we expect frost and zero weather any minute and no coal, only a little wood that was collected last Winter, there is a coal strike⁹ and it is hard, when it is all over it will take a month before we can get coal to heat the house but we will get over it. A hundred years from now we won't know the difference and have forgotten the winter we were cold.

Yesterday I sent you the promised book "The Battle with the Slum." When I look upon the book shelves and see what a lot of room my own books take up I realize that at least I have not been lazy. Last Saturday we had yearly meeting for Jacob A. Riis Settlement. Sixteen thousand dollars was spent in the last year, and for 1,400 women, men and children our house is the only real home. I am sending you one of our reports and a rather amusing review of Lammet and my story in one of the papers, it might amuse you.

By the way next year when I come to Denmark we must have a show of pictures of 1893. Let Emma look for them and before the school holidays if that would be best, it might bring in a little for the Institute.

Gen. Christensen and his wife were here a few days ago and Mrs. Christensen brought us a bunch of flowers Sofie had sent

⁸ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

⁹ The anthracite coal strike of 1902 in which Roosevelt intervened.

her, they came all the way across the ocean—the roses from Ribe and also news about Ribe, believe it or not but the General embraced me and kissed me, but we must put up with such things because he is a good kind man.

Lammet . . . and Vivi are going with me to visit Katie at her school in Massachusetts near Boston. Katie is enjoying herself there. I expect we shall bring her to Denmark although she hates to leave her own country. She is a Patriot.

. . . I have just come home after a little ride with Clara and her little girl. Lammet did not go with us today; she can do almost anything. Clara's little Virginia is sweet and the biggest flirt I ever saw. Clara herself is getting fat. She has a good girl to help her. We drove with Billy, our pony, which is Lammet's shadow. Yesterday we moved him from his own stable down to a friend's who has many horses and where it is warmer. Bruno, our dog, has sat and watched the stable door all day. He used to play with Billy, who would run, kick and roll about in the grass. He doesn't understand that the pony is gone. Bruno and the cat sleep in and under Lammet's bed every night when I am away; it wouldn't surprise me to find the pony there too some day! All animals follow Lammet.

Good-bye, dear Mother and Fibbe and Emma. My love to all my dear friends, Ulgaards and Hansen and Dybdals. I sent a book to the school the other day.

YOUR OLD JACOB

Shortly after he wrote this letter he learned that his mother was still seriously sick, and his fears were increased. He realized that she was suffering from some of the ills of age, but he had a son's hope that she would recover sufficiently to live for many years yet. He was constantly troubled about her and planned to go to Denmark to see her within the next year.

On December 19, 1902, the Washington papers carried the notice: "Jacob Riis, a White House Guest." He had stopped over and was to have breakfast with his friends before he returned to New York. His account, "Is There

a Santa Claus?" written for a magazine ¹⁰ tells of this incident so filled with the Christmas spirit:

... I went through the door into a beautiful white hall with lofty pillars between which there were regular banks of holly with the red berries shining through, just as if it were out in the woods! And from behind one of them there came the merriest laugh you could ever think of... there stood my host all framed in holly, and with the heartiest hand clasp. "Come in," he said, and drew me after. "The coffee is waiting." And he beamed upon the table with the veriest Christmas face as he poured it out himself, one cup for his dear wife and one for me....

While they were sitting at the table, Mr. Riis told his host and hostess about his mother's condition, and greatly to his joy, they sent a cable: "Your son is breakfasting with us. We send you our loving sympathy.—Theodore and Edith Roosevelt."

All too soon the pleasant morning was over, and he had to leave for the train "... it seemed to me as I went out of the door, where the big policeman touched his hat and wished me a Merry Christmas that the sun never shone so brightly in May as it did then. I quite expected to see the crocuses and the jonquils out in full bloom...." He walked on down the avenue and, reaching the station, boarded the train for home. Then he thought of the letters in his pocket which he had not opened:

... I took them out and read them and among them was one sent to me in trust for Santa Claus himself which I had to lay away—until I got the dew rubbed off my spectacles. One was from a great banker, and it contained a check for a

¹⁰ J. A. Riis, "Is There a Santa Claus?" Reprinted by special permission from the *Ladies' Home Journal*, XXI (Dec., 1903), p. 6 (copyright by The Curtis Publishing Company, 1903), and by permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.

thousand dollars to help buy a home for some poor children of the East Side tenements in New York— The other letter was from a lonely old widow, almost as old as my dear Mother in Denmark, and it contained a two-dollar bill. For years, she wrote, she had saved and saved, hoping sometime to have five dollars and then she would go with me to the homes of the very poor and be Santa Claus herself— Now she was so old that she could no longer think of such a trip and so she sent the money she had saved. . . .¹¹

During the early days of January and February, 1903, his mother grew steadily worse, and on February 21st she died. The distance was too great to go to Denmark, and he relied on his sisters to attend to the sad last details. On April 3, 1903, he wrote to them from Chicago:

DEAR SOFIE AND EMMA:

Your letter received yesterday. Now I have nearly finished my travels and will be on my way home to stay. Thank you dear Sister for all the trouble you have taken to send me Mother's possessions and I will see that they are received when the ship docks, also I thank you for having sent Lammet Mother's brooch. She will treasure it dearly; I do not ever remember having seen Mother without it. I also know that Elisabeth would love to have something of Mother's, whom she dearly loved. While I remember, I sent the other day 200 kroner to Dr. Kjar, was that enough? And tell me how much I ought to send Dr. Nielsen. Dr. Kjar is right; he tried to make a better man of me, but he did it so sparingly that I overcame my own optimism. His last letter informed me that Mother could not live many days. Dr. Kjar's faithfulness to Mother we will never forget and he will always be our dear friend. Mrs. Salto sent me a letter, she also belongs to the faithful and we have much to thank her for. I have just written to her, she is one of the many we shall visit in Denmark, and Dyelunds are one of the first. It was Elisabeth who thought about the flowers and telephoned to Dyelunds who of course understood.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Yes we must have a stone up over Mother's and Father's graves and Aunt Sofie's also, do you know who could cut them for us? If so, let me know and how much it would cost. When I get home on Thursday I will talk to Elisabeth about it. Yes, dear Emma, when I think of the words respectful and obedient, it brings tears to my eyes, Mother deserves a Halo, the good soul that she was.

Will you surely thank Bishop Koch for me, for all he did for Mother, and all the others, Olgaards and Dyelunds, I will write myself one of these days. God be with you all, Niels, the children, Dig, yourself and Sofie. No, we will not stop writing, but write oftener now we are so few left. The last letter to Mother I had a feeling that something was wrong and wondered whether or not I should go home at once, but it did not happen so. I thought all along that Mother would get better.

YOUR BROTHER JACOB ¹²

With his mother's death, another link with the past had been severed. To a man like Jacob Riis, touched by the tender emotions of home and family life, this meant a very deep loss. He treasured every tie with great fidelity and grieved over the inevitable changes wrought by the passing of time. He was too busy, however, to brood over his troubles and soon covered his sorrow by resuming his useful work.

¹² Letter in Dan-America Museum.

CHAPTER XVIII

Kaleidoscopic Pictures of Places and People

I

IN January, 1903, Riis gave an important series of lectures in Philadelphia—the William Bull Lectures for that year at the Divinity School. According to the stipulation of the donor, a sum of six hundred dollars annually was paid for a series of not fewer than four talks on the subject of Christian Sociology. Riis spoke on *The Peril and the Preservation of the Home*,¹ and his lectures extended over several days. The family, he said, is the vital force in our Republic and such features of the modern age as overcrowding in the tenements and sweat-shop labor constitute danger to the well-being of the home. He urged that capital and labor do each its own part in promoting reform, capital seeking only a “just reward”² by sharing with labor, and labor guaranteeing honest work while demanding clean shops. He told the young ministers in the audience of many opportunities for service.

During the remainder of the winter and spring Riis filled engagements which took him westward to Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas. In most of his lectures he told the story of “Tony,” the neglected street urchin who needed a chance.³ At the end of the season he settled down to write some articles which Mr.

¹ J. A. Riis, *The Peril and the Preservation of the Home* (Philadelphia, 1903).

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

Gilder wished to publish in *The Century*. The following letter ⁴ to his friend indicates that he had some trouble with his project:

June 20, 1903

... No! You said it yourself once—the only “story” I would probably ever write, or indeed *could* write, was my own, and it is done. I am mighty glad I did not “slip by the little girl” in it to meet another.

If I could I would be very glad to write such a story as you outline, but it was never in my line as you know. I was never a poet, just a reporter. . . . I have taxed my brain vainly for something new in the matter of the kindergarten. To me its mission always sums itself up in the story I told somewhere of going through the Hull House Kindergarten with Miss Addams and looking at some harvest scene pictures. A man standing up wiping his brow and a woman half recumbent; about getting lunch I guess. And of the remark a little girl from Polk St. made to Miss Addams, after studying the picture attentively,—“Well, he knocked her down, didn’t he?” In Detroit they had a kindergarten I visited in an old stable, with a trap-door in the wall through which the Jersey cow put in her head to have it scratched. . . .”

Again on August 6th he wrote to Mr. Gilder:

... What a man you are! Do know I am trying to lock myself in and forget the world, and here you thrust it all upon me in those pictures!

They are very tempting, for all the newsgirl picture does not pertain to New York. There are hardly as many girls selling papers in the whole city as there be in the picture. But that does not matter. Plenty of other places where girls do sell papers. When must you have copy? Tell me, and I will tell you if I can do it. I will watch for the Spirit to move me. . . .⁵

This year he published *Children of the Tenements* (The Macmillan Company), a collection of poignant stories taken

⁴ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, June 20, 1903 (Miss Rosamond Gilder’s collection).

⁵ Mr. Riis’s letters (R. W. Riis collection).

from his earlier work, *Out of Mulberry Street*. Incidentally the book gives the reader a notion of Riis's mannerisms and personality. For instance, in one story, he spoke of the fun he had at fifty sliding in a tenement-street snow, spectacles, umbrella, and all.

2

Riis's interest in trying to get an adequate reform school dated back to the early nineties, when he had been shocked to find that delinquents were being cared for in some institutions on the basis of size rather than on that of their individual difficulties. Time and again he had deplored the placing of young offenders in the same group with hardened criminals. Part of his work as Good Government Club Agent had consisted in urging that the Randall's Island Reformatory be replaced by a more modern system designed to meet personality problems. He had noted with great interest the work of the Children's Aid Society in establishing a farm school for boys, in Westchester County; and he believed that if sufficient pressure were exerted, the city and state would make provision for more scientific care of the young offender.¶ In June, 1903, when he went to talk to the boys on Randall's Island, he noticed that they were ill-clothed and hungry. His sympathies were so aroused that he made charges to the governor, who then made a personal inspection of the institution. For *Charities and The Commons*, July 4, 1903, he wrote an article, "The Case of the House of Refuge," in which he said: "Here is an almost century old reformatory, a private corporation without endowment, doing public business with the money of the state on a site lent by the city . . . the boys go 'always hungry.' " ⁶ He deplored the presence of

⁶ J. A. Riis, "The Case of the House of Refuge," *Charities and The Commons*, XI (July 4, 1903), pp. 28-29.

girls on the island and said it could be put to an end by a single act of the legislature. Finally, he urged the removal of the institution to another site away from the city where modern methods could be adopted, along the lines of a farm and cottage plan. "But the thing to do right now is to stop the mingling of truants and thieves on Randall's Island. It does not do the thieves any good and it hurts the truants very badly. . . ."⁷ On August 8th the *Evening Sun* printed a letter⁸ written by him urging the establishment of a reform school upstate for girl delinquents. Results were not immediately forthcoming, and he continued to agitate for legislative action. On November 15, 1903,⁹ a newspaper carried the caption "Jacob Riis Calls House of Refuge Hot Bed of Vice" and announced that as a result of his investigation, a bill to establish a farm school for boys in Westchester County would be presented at the next session of the legislature.

3

Roosevelt was hoping to be reëlected in 1904, and in the autumn of 1903 he was already making some gestures in that direction. In September, when he went to Syracuse to make an address, Jake Riis went with him on the special train from Oyster Bay. After the Syracuse speech they returned to Richmond Hill, where Roosevelt addressed another group. In the course of his talk, he said: "... You know I am very fond of Mr. Riis, and the reason why is because when I preach citizenship, I can turn to him and think he has practiced just what I have been preaching. . . ."¹⁰ At the same time he gave a brief sketch of Riis's work.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ A signed letter.

⁹ *New York Herald.*

¹⁰ *New York Daily Tribune*, Sept. 9, 1903.

There was much excitement in New York City this fall over the mayoralty campaign. George B. McClellan was running on the Democratic ticket and Seth Low was seeking reelection as spokesman of reform. No voter was more ardent than Riis during the month before the election. In a lecture at the Majestic on October 4th,¹¹ he denounced Tammany and said that tenement-house reform could best be maintained by reelecting Mayor Low. At *The World's* request he interviewed the Mayor for the Sunday political supplement; and to assure "fair play to both sides" he had a talk with McClellan and wrote up his interview for the following Sunday's issue.¹² He was one of the speakers at the Woman's Municipal League's Mass Meeting for Low and urged every woman to send her husband or brother out to vote against Tammany.¹³ Surprisingly enough, no politicians seem to have replied to Riis's statements. Perhaps they thought that he was something of a "crank" in reform and that he was not to be taken too seriously.¹⁴ At any rate, he was able to decry Tammany again and again without bringing any clouds down around his head; but on Election Day he was disappointed for the count showed that McClellan had won.

4

The train pulling into the Washington station on December 15th brought our friend Riis. A newspaper carried the story, "Jacob Riis at White House . . . arrived in Washington today and will be the guest of the President. He will address several meetings while here speaking

¹¹ *New York Herald*, Oct. 5, 1903.

¹² *The World*, Oct. 11, 18, 1903.

¹³ *New York World-Telegram* reference clippings.

¹⁴ Interviews with his friends.

on sociological topics.”¹⁵ The New York *Herald* said: “Jacob Riis Tours Capital Slums. . . . In order to get material for his address (Washington needs and conditions), Mr. Riis, accompanied by Commissioner McFarland and Charles F. Weller, secretary of the Associated Charities, drove through the Washington slums and Mr. Riis found them much worse than any of the slums in New York. . . .” And a third most interesting piece of news announced:

JACOB A. RIIS TALKS BEFORE THE SENATE
AND HOUSE COMMITTEE

Dec. 16.—The invitation¹⁶ extended to Jacob A. Riis to deliver an address before the Senate and House Committees on the District of Columbia was regarded as an unusual though deserved compliment to the New York reformer.

In writing of the incident later, Riis said: “...When I argued the case against Washington slums before a joint committee of the two Houses of Congress...one smooth-shaven Senator was quite indifferent even to the unheard-of contagious disease record in Willow Tree Alley till I said that clothes lines full of towels hung across the alley. They were from the Senate barber shop which had its washing done there. At that, my Senator sat up straight and wiped his chin thoughtfully, and after that he took an interest....”¹⁷

He was happy to find on December 27th that his labors in Washington were to bring some results. A newspaper¹⁸ carried the notice that a Sanitary Housing Company had been appointed to build homes for Washington's poor,

¹⁵ *The World*, Dec. 15, 1903.

¹⁶ New York *Daily Tribune*, Dec. 17, 1903.

¹⁷ J. A. Riis, “The Plight of St. Louis,” *The Survey*, XX (May 19, 1908), p. 215.

¹⁸ *The Sun*, Dec. 27, 1903.

and that within a few days, erection of some cheap but healthful dwellings would begin.

In the course of this Washington visit he received a shock. His friend, John R. Procter, President of the Civil Service Commission, died suddenly of angina pectoris. It was an unexpected grief, and Riis collapsed. His host, Roosevelt, wired to the towns where he was next to speak and canceled the engagements. But by the end of the month he was able to resume his work; and on Thursday, December 31st, he wrote a note in his calendar: "Goodby old calendar, a good year was this, a mighty good year. Full of work—every minute, but such good times as I have had. If none so good ever come again, those can't be taken from me. I have had them. The Good God be thankful and preserve us all *to Him*." ¹⁹ On the January 1, 1904, page of the little pocket diary given him by Vivi he wrote: "Come now, New Year, and let's see how we can get on together. If you'll behave, I will. But I warn you, no tricks!" ²⁰

5

The year 1904 ought to be placed in a separate chapter because it meant so very much to the Riises. In the spring they went around in a state of happy excitement, for on May 25th they were to sail for Denmark. Once more they were to pass a delightful summer in the old town of Ribe. Such a bustling as was going on at 524 North Beech Street! And then at last came the day of sailing.

On June 26th, while in Copenhagen, they received a great thrill. At luncheon at the hotel one day a porter came in hurriedly to announce that a royal lackey had arrived with a message. Their Royal Highnesses the

¹⁹ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Crown Prince and Princess desired their attendance at a dinner two days hence. Riis blurted out, "The dickens they do" ²¹ in English, thinking of the silk hats and regalia which he did not possess. His wife hushed him and asked the messenger to thank their Royal Highnesses. And go they did, at the urgent pleading of the children who felt that it was a tremendous honor. For the occasion Riis borrowed a top-hat three sizes too small and with his wife, drove out to the palace in the same carriage with the American Minister and his wife. When they arrived, lackeys swarmed about to help the ladies from the carriage. Inside the house, however, the guests were set at their ease. The Crown Princess came forward with outstretched hand, saying: "It was very good of you to come out to us." ²² At that friendly little greeting, Riis floundered about for some Danish and uttered the first words that he could summon: "How very respectable of you to ask us." At this the Princess looked at Riis's wife and laughed; then the Prince came up and they all laughed. That broke the ice; and the next moment they were surrounded by the children of Their Highnesses and were "introduced right and left." ²³

When dinner was announced, one of the young princes, a shy boy, took Mrs. Riis in, and while doing so confided to her that he wanted to "live in a New York skyscraper and shoot up and down in the elevator. . . ." ²⁴ During dinner Riis talked with the Crown Prince about America and its people; and they both praised Roosevelt. After dinner the guests and their hosts strolled in the garden. Riis was

²¹ J. A. Riis, "King Frederick at Home," *The Outlook*, LXXXII (Mar. 10, 1906), p. 552. (The article was included in *The Old Town*, published by The Macmillan Company. Permission to reprint by courtesy of The Macmillan Company, publishers, and New Outlook Company.)

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 553.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

much impressed when he saw the boys, one and all, kiss their father good-night.

This vacation²⁵ in Ribe was a time of great peace and happiness. In the twilight Riis chatted with his sister and their friends. Mrs. Riis was not well and could not go far on walks, but Jacob often took his sister Emma for a stroll. Almost invariably their path led them to the girlhood home of Mrs. Riis, and again and again he told the story of his betrothal.

There was something wistfully final about the perfection of this summer. Looking back later Riis remembered each happy hour and looked on it as part of an enduring dream. On September 12th, they sailed for America. Beyond Hamlet's Castle and Elsinore they passed, and so on their long trip. Incidentally, it was on this voyage that young Kate met a certain surgeon of whom we shall have more to say later.

In 1904 Riis's biography, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen*, was published. Some of the material had appeared in magazine form before; but it was now assembled with the idea of helping Roosevelt in the campaign for reelection. In the book Riis recounted the leading events in Roosevelt's life and stressed the quality of integrity which he had observed in the old Mulberry Street days and afterwards. In mentioning the many occasions when they had threshed out some problem together he said:

Roosevelt was never a stickler for the letter of anything. I know that perhaps better than anybody. If I were to tell how many times we have sat down together to devise a way of getting through the formal husk, even at the risk of bruising

²⁵ J. A. Riis, "Our Beautiful Summer," *The Outlook*, LXXX (May 6, 1905), pp. 47-56.



Courtesy of Mr. Roger William Riis

Underwood & Underwood

JACOB A. RIIS, PRESIDENT THEODORE ROOSEVELT,
AND BISHOP VINCENT
CHAUTAUQUA, NEW YORK, 1905

it some, to get at the kernel...I might frighten some good people heedlessly....²⁶

He emphasized Roosevelt's humane spirit and told of a particular incident which illustrated this. Riis, it seems, was invited to have luncheon at Oyster Bay. He had been asked to present a plea for the immediate cabling of the names of soldiers in the Philippines who fell or died of cholera—as it was, the War Department permitted only the names of killed or wounded officers to be sent by cable, and anxious mothers of privates were forced to wait for weeks to receive news. At luncheon Roosevelt was too busy with other guests to hear the story, but, Riis writes, “as luck would have it, I was put beside General Young, fine old warrior...and I told him of what was on my heart. He knew of no such order when he was in the Philippines....”²⁷ They disagreed and Riis dragged the argument on purposely until the President heard and was so moved by the story that he said: “Send the order to have the names telegraphed now.”

Riis's attitude in dealing with his material was entirely uncritical. The book was all praise and no blame. Such a work, although it was conceded to be honest and sincere was apt to bring him some negative criticisms. A few of the comments follow:

The reception which a campaign biography such as this meets with is a fair gauge of the reading public to which it is addressed.... It is strenuous, it is loud, it is fervid, it is unmeasured, it is not logical. It is hoarsely enthusiastic, and it is all pitched in one high monotonous key of laudation.... It seems sometimes as if the megaphone rather than the pen

²⁶ J. A. Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (New York, 1904), pp. 216-217. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 270-271.

were being used. Granting everything that Mr. Riis says it is overemphasized to the point of exhaustion.

It is painful to observe that disrespectful critics, instead of carping, have contented themselves with laughing. . . .

What he says of Mr. Roosevelt as police commissioner is practically Mr. Riis's thesis throughout—"every rascal" is "his implacable enemy; the honest, his followers almost to a man." Consequently the chances are at least ninety-nine in a hundred that any hostile critic is a rascal. . . . It should not be overlooked that Mr. Riis was originally a Democrat. The zeal of converts is proverbial though sometimes dangerous to those whom they join. (*The Nation*, September 8, 1904)

The Independent (June 30, 1904), after describing the book as an interesting character sketch, says:

It contains a little more Roosevelt and a little less Riis than "The Making of an American" but not much. But whatever Mr. Riis writes is interesting even tho—or perhaps because—he makes no distinction between biography and autobiography.

The Dial (March 16, 1904) carried a long review and commented partly as follows:

Mr. Riis calls Mr. Roosevelt "my hero," he discloses perfections only, and in his partisanship does not scruple to condemn those who see with eyes less blinded by devotion. . . . For all Mr. Riis's Americanism . . . this adopted citizen seems to have ingrained in his character a feudal devotion to princes. . . .

As might be expected, Mr. Riis's prejudices lead him into statements easily challenged. . . .

The biography was popular. It sold well, was quoted widely, and made Riis more of a nationally known figure than he had ever been before.

In addition to writing this book,²⁸ Riis did what else

²⁸ In 1904, Riis also published a small book, *Is There a Santa Claus?*

he could to forward Roosevelt's campaign. On May 7th he had a letter in the *Evening Sun* under the title "Is Roosevelt Unsafe?"²⁹ He introduced encomiums on Roosevelt into his lecture programs, and followed closely the growth of public sentiment in favor of the President. November 8th was a great day; that night he had the pleasure of listening to returns which brought victory to his friend.

Immediately after the election, he left on a far-western tour; before doing so, he wrote in his diary (November 9th): "Took \$1,000. bonds of Oregon Short Line Company & put them into hands of Kuhn Loeb & Co. for exchange, also the sum of \$193.90 for investment."³⁰ He was not far from the \$30,000 mark which he had set as a goal³¹ so that he could retire from lecturing and stay at home with his family.

²⁹ New York *Evening Sun*, May 7, 1904.

³⁰ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

³¹ Writer's interview with Mr. John Riis, September, 1933.

CHAPTER XIX

Through the Shadows

I

IN January and the early part of February, 1905, he was lecturing in California. On February 7th he wrote in his diary: "Threw my first snow ball this winter among the peaks of Sierra M— Mtns." From there he went to Colorado, then to New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama, and then up to Washington, where Mrs. Riis and the children saw the Inauguration with him. On March 4th he wrote to his sisters, Sofie and Emma. In the letter he spoke of the recent illness of Mrs. Riis, but added that he thought it was nothing serious. Later in the month he wrote to Emma "... Lammet has been ill for two sad months, but now improving..." and "... Katie is home and not going back to school, but staying with Mother..."¹ During April his tour, arranged largely by Redpath, took him to cities in Ohio, to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and northward to New England.²

He felt deep satisfaction when he checked his accounts that spring and found that he had the \$30,000 necessary for retirement.³ His pleasure was dimmed, however, by the fact that Mrs. Riis did not regain her strength, even though she kept up her activities such as attending meetings of the Twentieth Century Club and Church Society

¹ Letter dated March 29, 1905 (Dan-America Museum).

² Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

³ Writer's interview with Mr. John Riis, September, 1933.

gatherings. May opened with forebodings. Mrs. Riis became suddenly ill on May 4th with lung congestion. This developed into bronchial pneumonia, with complications. Mr. Riis canceled his engagements and sped home. From the beginning her case seemed hopeless. Riis wrote to his friends at the Settlement:

Before this comes to you it may be that the Giver of all Life has taken from me that which is more precious by far to me than my own. O pray for us, all of you, that she may stay with us for we cannot think of life without her. Every hour our hearts are broken as she lies struggling with death. . . . I send you our contributions (\$100) to the children. It is hers, not mine, as everything; every tender thought that came out of my life was hers. God pity us all, if we are to walk the rest of the way without her.⁴

Newspapers, too, carried his appeal for the prayers of friends that she might live. The sad hours dragged by; and on May 18th he wrote in his diary: "Lammet died, God help us all."⁵

Edward was on a newspaper staff in California and John was in Denver, Colorado. They came hurrying home. Clara and her husband lived near-by in Richmond Hill; Kate and William were already at home.

A close friend of Riis calling in sympathy during those first few terrible days after her death⁶ found him cleaning the outside of the house with a cloth—the inside was always immaculate.⁷ No one disturbed him; it would take his mind off his sorrow. To his dear friend Mr. Gilder, two days after Mrs. Riis's death he wrote:

⁴ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *The Sun*, May 19, 1905; *New York World*, May 19, 1905; *New York Times*, May 19, 1905.

⁷ Writer's interview with Dr. Robbins, fall, 1933.

May 20, 1905

DEAR OLD FRIEND:

I have longed to see your face these dreadful days. Now she lies white and still and so innocent and sweet, the storm is over, and I sit by her side. I would not call her back if I could. She was so tired. She died gazing with her dimming eyes upon a picture of the Good Shepherd carrying a white lamb in his arms—a picture I gave her the first Xmas we were together—and He has taken her to His home; gently, lovingly has He carried her away. You know I always called her the Lamb, and now she is His to keep till I come. And come I must, we all must. How can we help it when she is there.

I can hardly weep any more. But in the still night-watches the loneliness of it all comes upon me and it is dreadful. Still I shall try to take up a man's work and do it, and so it may be that the road shall not seem so long or so hard any more. God help us *all!*

To you and your loved ones my tender love. God keep your dear home unbroken many, many happy years. If I remain in the country this summer I wish I might run up to the valley and see you sometime. I shall miss another beloved face there—Procter's. But so, we are growing old, and as Roosevelt wrote to me "we are in range of the rifle pits." Without the promise of the blessed tomorrow, what would life be now?

Ever yours,

JACOB A. RIIS⁸

On May 23rd a private service was conducted at the house by the Reverend S. D. Andersen, the family's Danish pastor from Brooklyn, and later services were held at the Church of the Resurrection. Burial was at Maple Grove Cemetery, a few blocks away from the house.

A simple little headstone surmounted by the figure of a lamb was set in place.

To Dr. Jane E. Robbins, his dear friend of many years, he wrote:

⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, May 20, 1905 (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

June 9, 1905

DEAR DOCTOR:

For the offer of your home and your restful meadows, God bless you. As yet I can not get away from where they laid her beloved body. It is not that I believe her in the grave; far from it. But it seems as if I ought to go and deck the place where she rests with flowers every day. I know now what Mother meant with twelve boys in the cemetery when she said that her home was near them. After a while I shall be able to go a little way.

Yes, Katie is growing daily more like her mother. No one can ever be quite like her, and I am glad. But Katie has much of her strength, quite unsuspected, and of her great affection. She is a dear girl. And so is Clara. John, who is very near my heart, has gone back to Denver today. He was needed there, which tells the story of his growth. But he is coming back for Xmas, and Sunday he will stay with us. I am tired of all this moving. *She* was. It cuts deep in my heart when I think that I encouraged the children to fly; but so it seemed necessary. Yet I know she suffered under it. A father's judgment is a poor match for a mother's heart. God help us all!

It may be that I shall yet come to see you. I am trying to find a good school for Vivi, and am considering the "Gunnery" at Washington, Conn. and the Curtis School at Brookfield Centre. Do you know either? Mrs. Fiske is coming east, I know, but yet no word from her about the Berkshire house. My love to your dear Mother and Sisters.

Ever yours,
JACOB A. RIIS⁹

Likewise to his sister Emma, who was always a comfort, he wrote:

New York, June 25, 1905

DEAR SISTER EMMA:

Thank you for your dear letter because I know it must have been hard for you all. It is hard for me, twenty times a day I have things I want to say to her, she was all my life from the time I can remember. I think of her, hear her echo

⁹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins (Dr. Robbins' collection).

but see her not and so I go back to my work, all the joy has gone out of me. I did all for her. Yes, little Emma, so it has to be. I am used to fighting for everything against everything, but now I must fight with myself the time there is left for me. I do not mean by that that I have given up all hope. I will do my work, but the inclination is not there. We are living quite well so far. Ed and Florence are married and live with us, but in the end it may be best for them to go west. Life is for the young, and I do not want to see them stay here if they should be out there, but we shall see when the time comes. John is in Denver, during this time we have come very close to each other, much closer than ever before Lammet left him for me and I believe he feels that. John is doing well; he has grown into a *man* and it was to his Mother's great joy last winter. Katie is a good housekeeper; she takes after Mother. Vivi is going to school in the country; it will be best for him. Clara is a splendid girl and often comes over. Here you have all the news—my own health is good. I have lost weight but I could afford to as I was too fat! I have thought about coming to Denmark but I don't suppose anything will come of it. I don't believe I could bear it, especially not to Ribe—that I only want to remember as a memory. I have talked to Sofie about it and am waiting for her answer from the Bishop, perhaps next summer I can face it, if I live. If not, I shall be with Lammet, and that is where I would rather be. If only God will let me be where she is, but the love I have had for her came from Him and for that reason he will surely let me in.

I shall most likely stay in Richmond Hill this summer and get used to my sorrow. It has to be borne so I might just as well face it. I had such nice letters from Dybdals and Mrs. Olgaard. Will you go and see them and thank them both for me, it gives me joy to think of Mother as a friend of Mrs. Olgaards. I also had a letter from an old pupil of yours, Styrmand E. Vilandt. He wishes me to write over here about North Sleswig, perhaps the time will come to put that misfortune straight long before any of us think.

Now, little Emma, may God be with you and with sister and brother in Vandvarket. How lonely it must be in Ribe these days.

Go and place a heather wreath on Mother's grave for me, now it seems as though we shall all meet soon and pray to God none of us may be missing. . . .¹⁰

It was fortunate that he had much work to do. He managed to fill up his days so that there was little time to think. But when night came on, he could hardly endure the emptiness of life.

2

Grief-stricken though he was, he thought of others, too; and in July, 1905, he was able to be of great service to the Sea Breeze Hospital at Coney Island. Attention had been called to the need for larger accommodations for children suffering from tuberculosis of bone and gland. Through the efforts of Miss Winnington, secretary on *The Outlook* staff, who was herself dying of an incurable disease, Riis had been tremendously impressed by the possibility of treating little cripples by means of sea air. At this time the hospital at Coney Island could only accommodate forty-five children, whereas five thousand needed care.¹¹ It occurred to Riis that a visit from President and Mrs. Roosevelt would attract much attention to the institution and its needs, and enlisted the Roosevelts' interest in the idea. The visit was arranged. On July 19th the presidential yacht, the *Mayflower*, pulled up at the dock and the distinguished guests were shown over the grounds and through the buildings. The sight of the poor broken little bodies was sufficient in itself to point to the need.¹²

As a result of the visit of these guests, plans were formed to raise money, and to get the city to take over the prop-

¹⁰ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

¹¹ J. A. Riis, "The Story of Sea Breeze," *The Outlook*, CVII (May 9, 1914), p. 85.

¹² J. A. Riis, "The Children's Plea," *The Outlook*, LXXXII (Mar. 31, 1906), p. 755.

erty necessary for the enlargement of the hospital. When John D. Rockefeller heard of the proposed extension of the work of Sea Breeze, he said he would give \$125,000 on the condition that an equal amount be raised by the following spring.¹³

So great was Riis's interest in Sea Breeze that he stayed there several days, and became fast friends with the youngsters. Later on when he was ill in the Post-Graduate Hospital, he received quaint letters from some of these tots, and he carefully preserved the touching little documents.

In behalf of the children he wrote an appealing story, "Snow-Babies' Christmas," for the December, 1905, issue of *The Century*. He also wrote an article for *The Outlook* calling attention to the pitiable plight of New York's tubercular children. He raised some money through friends. In the spring of 1906 he received the glad news that an upstate man had come forward with the \$125,000 to match Mr. Rockefeller's gift.¹⁴ In this project, as in many others, Riis was of course not the only person working for the end in view. The A. I. C. P., under whose management Sea Breeze was conducted, had earnestly entreated the city officials and the public to increase the endowment; but Riis's pen dramatized the need so that people were moved to give.

The victory was by no means complete. There were many obstacles to surmount before the land could be procured for the larger institution, and it was not until years later, on January 27, 1914, that the ground was broken for the new Sea Breeze.¹⁵

During the summer after their mother's death the two younger Riis children visited Dr. Robbins and her family

¹³ J. A. Riis, "The Story of Sea Breeze," p. 87.

¹⁴ J. A. Riis, "A Gift of Health," *The Outlook*, LXXXIII, pp. 654-655.

¹⁵ J. A. Riis, "The Story of Sea Breeze," p. 85.

at Wethersfield, and upon their return Riis wrote the doctor an appreciative note. At the same time he told her of his call at Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell's home and of the feeble condition in which he had found her: ¹⁶

MY DEAR DOCTOR:

A thousand thanks to you and your good Mother, and all of you for your kindness to the children. They came home full of enthusiasm for Wethersfield and you. Vivi swears by you. I knew that would be the way. I was sure of it.

I went out yesterday to Greenwich and had dinner with Mrs. Lowell. Her appearance shocked me. She looks absolutely as if she were dead or nearly so, and speaks barely loud enough to hear. She has been very ill indeed, but she is as good and gentle as ever. It does not look to me as if it were possible that she should live long—I don't know what ailed her—but she says that she is regaining her strength and will be able to return to New York in a couple of months. God grant that it may be so. It would be a great blow to me, and to us all, if she were to go from us—really I don't see what business I have here with all the good and the wise and the gentle—not all happily but so many of them, getting ready to go. It seems as if I were left to do all the damage I can. Poor good Mrs. Lowell! She held my hand, would not let it go most of the time I was there—quite unlike her old self. But she walked to the table on my arm, and was quite hearty at the meal, laughing and talking.

The poor people that have no home-made rice-pudding! They remind me of the old lady who came and asked me to get the President to transfer her son, a sailor on a battleship. Any other ship would do. And when I told her that the battleship was the finest kind she agreed, but objected anxiously: "but I have been on board, and there is a draft, there is a draft." I suppose she had found her chicken working in a gangway with the wind letting through. Poor mother.

Vivi says he can row, and seems to think he is getting to be quite a man. On his chamber-door last winter a note was pasted that read "Vivi Riis" VERY STRONG. (The two last

¹⁶ Dr. Robbins' collection.

words were cut from the label of a household ammonia bottle!)

Ever your
JACOB A. RIIS

My love to your
Mother, yourself and
all your house.

Riis wanted to have a memorial window to his wife placed in the Domkirke, in Ribe, and on August 19th wrote to ask his sister Emma to make arrangements. At the same time he suggested that a window be placed for him near that of his wife: "Now the window, yes, let it be Prodigal Son as that is how I shall reach Heaven's door if I ever get so far."¹⁷

Meanwhile he went ahead with his story for Mr. Gilder and on August 22, 1905, he wrote: "...When I had finished this story I laid my head down upon the paper and wished I might never write another. I should like the conclusion of this one to be the message to my people and day. But if it is to be different I shall do my part, to be sure."

Friends prevailed on him to go away for a rest and on August 22nd he left for a two weeks' visit at the Seligmans' home in the Adirondacks. From there he wrote to Mr. Gilder: "I sleep here, yes, better it seems to me than I have done in many moons...it is a happy spot. The Seligmans whose guest I am are most lovely people whose hospitality and affection, one with the other, parents, sisters and brothers, is one of the most beautiful things in life..."¹⁸ The fresh air and change of scene along with cheerful companionship worked marvels for him, and he began for the first time since his wife's death to feel that

¹⁷ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

¹⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder (R. W. Riis collection).

he must resume his activities in public affairs.¹⁹ An instance of this renewed interest was shown on August 26, 1905,²⁰ when the New York *Sun* bore the message that he had indorsed a ticket headed by McClellan for Mayor, with William Travers Jerome for District Attorney. He was quoted as saying: "...In the last campaign I worked against McClellan, but he has given us such a good administration that I take back all that I said against him at that time. . . ."

A few days after *The Sun* article about Riis's endorsement of McClellan appeared,²¹ the New York *World* came out with a head-line: "Jacob Riis Now a Mayoralty Possibility."²² *The World* said that Riis might be asked to run on the Fusion ticket. Next day, however, the paper retracted its statement, saying that Riis would under no circumstances accept the nomination if it were offered to him.

Having completed his visit at the Seligmans', Mr. Riis left with young William for a two weeks' stay at Dr. Tracy's camp. There the sorrowing father and the lonely small boy drew close to each other. In recent years Mr. Riis had had to be away so much that he had seen far too little of this youngest child, but now they became real comrades. In a note to Dr. Robbins, Riis wrote: "Vivi . . . is in the seventh heaven at the proposal of *real* fishing at last."

¹⁹ Mr. Riis was made a member of the publication committee of the New York Charity Organization Society in 1905 when the merger of *Charities* and *The Commons* took place (F. B. Watson, *The Charity Organization Movement in the U. S.*, p. 305). Miss Jane Addams and Mr. Joseph Lee were also on the committee.

²⁰ *The Sun*, Aug. 26, 1905.

²¹ *The World*, Sept. 7, 1905.

²² *The World*, Sept. 17, 1905, scored Riis as follows for supporting McClellan: "Cold Facts Overlooked . . . Is Plainly Unaware of the many millions of Dollars That Flow Unchecked Through Tammany Fingers . . ." etc.

The concern which Riis had felt for Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell's condition earlier in the year had not been without foundation. She became increasingly ill and died that fall. At the memorial service held in the Assembly Hall of the United Charities Building on November 13, 1905, Riis was asked to be one of the speakers. In his talk he gave instances of Mrs. Lowell's rare wisdom and patience. He told of an occasion when he and Mrs. Lowell had gone to Mayor Grant to complain about the police-station houses:

We had nagged and nagged the Mayor until he was tired of it, and when we told him for the fiftieth time, I suppose, that in Boston they had municipal lodging houses, he cried out in impatience: "Boston, Boston! I am sick of the name of Boston!" I suppose he did not know what Boston meant to her; I turned to her in some apprehension to see how she took it but she was leaning back in her chair and laughing heartily.²³

On another occasion, he said, they went to Albany to defend a certain bill. He was in the midst of his argument when an Assemblyman spoke up and asked pointedly what these reformers got out of it all. Riis was very angry until he turned to Mrs. Lowell and found that she was as calm as ever and had completely ignored the remark.²⁴

Late in the fall he resumed his lectures, but he arranged to be in New York for some time after December 14th. On his return home he suffered an attack of the grippe; and on December 20th he wrote to Dr. Robbins:

I think it is as much that confounded mortgage that has been troubling me but I have been directing operations fairly

²³ W. R. Stewart, *The Philanthropic Work of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (New York, 1911), pp. 526-8. (By permission of The Macmillan Company, publishers.)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

from my bed and I mean to have it paid off by Jan. 1st; also, it will be paid off.²⁵ I am going to read Mr. Melish's sermon and also the article in McClure's after I get through with this mail. . . . Tell your friend that I voted for McClellan because I emphatically thought he was the best man and I think so now, and I am glad he is in. Furthermore, there are some things I wanted to do to improve matters and I am convinced that I can do them with him. . . . [Farther along in the same letter, he said] I have also read "Of Immortality" in Harper's for December, Maeterlinck. But all those things seem to me to be beside the mark. I *know* that I shall live, *as I am* after the grave, because Jesus said so . . . so why all these speculations. They leave me cold. Give me the old fiery Methodist preaching. It had no note of doubt in it and it satisfies me. . . .²⁶

With him that first Christmas after his wife's death were: John who had come from Denver, Ed and his wife Florence, and Clara and her family, besides his two youngest children. He later wrote to his sister:

. . . We had dinner together with some small presents for the children but no Christmas tree, that is over for us. We came closer together than ever before and Mother's love was with us and helped us. The Doctor gave me a picture of her I had never seen before. It was taken once when I was away . . . yes, my friend, that was in those days. . . . Christmas Day I was out of bed long enough to go to the churchyard and put flowers on her grave. . . . I have just been up again, but it looks so sad in December sunshine.²⁷

²⁵ His worries were relieved on Dec. 30, 1905, when the mortgage was burned. The house celebrated the occasion with all-day rejoicing, and a special tribute was paid to the late Mrs. Riis (*The Sun*, Dec. 31, 1905).

²⁶ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins, Dec. 20, 1905 (R. W. Riis collection).

²⁷ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Emma Reinsholm, Dec. 27, 1905 (Dan-America Museum).

CHAPTER XX

Hard Work

I

SPEEDING trains carried the traveler southward and into the Middle West early in January, 1906. At Toledo, Ohio, he was scheduled to deliver an address at the New Novia on "The Battle With the Slum," and in order to make his talk more effective he visited social settlements and inquired into housing conditions. Reporters found him and jotted down the message of Roosevelt's friend. The fight against money power and organized privilege grabbers would be led by the President,¹ he said; "... as he emphasized this last declaration Riis tipped forward in his chair and cracked his fists together as though he were dealing a blow to the army of opposition."²

From this trip he returned to Richmond Hill on January 27th for the unveiling of a window to Mrs. Riis in the Church of the Resurrection.³ He had made the selection: a beautiful stained-glass window from Munich bearing the picture of the Good Shepherd with a lamb in His arms.

From Richmond Hill he went on to Washington on January 30, 1906, for a lecture before an Epworth League

¹ *The World*, Jan. 21, 1906, said Senators and Representatives were "inclined to look at the views of Jacob Riis as a man given to extravagances when he speaks of President Roosevelt," but it was inclined to credit his statement about the possibility of Roosevelt's accepting the nomination in the next election.

² Clipping from the *Toledo News Bee*, Jan. 19, 1906 (R. W. Riis collection).

³ Mr. Riis's diary (R. W. Riis collection).

audience and while there visited at the White House. He was still in poor health and when he returned to New York seemed noticeably ill. When his friends commented he said, "It shows me I'm not as young as I used to be. . . ." (*The Sun*, February 7, 1906). His condition became worse and he was forced to cancel his immediate engagements and go to Post-Graduate Hospital. While he was a patient there he wrote ⁴ to Dr. Robbins:

Feb. 21, 1906

DEAR DOCTOR:

Thank you for coming in. I will take the prescription, let Dr. Satterthwaite rage. Though Kropotkin always has stood for me as a "red," and I don't like the "reds," we shall see.

I have opened upon the Children's Hospital. It is stuck in the Committee at Albany, along with the Rockaway Park. We shall pull them both out. I wrote the beginning last night for fear Dr. S. wouldn't let me do it here, and he won't. Still the thing is started and the *Eve Sun* will keep it up till we get the bill through. It should begin today or tomorrow.

Come in and see me. Any hour after 11, any day after tomorrow.

Yours always,
JACOB A. RIIS

On March 5th, the anniversary of his wedding, he was back in Richmond Hill and he wrote ⁵ to Dr. Robbins:

DEAR DOCTOR:

You were bad, not to come up. I was lonesome. It was today 30 years since my wedding. That day life began for me. It sometimes seems to me it ended last Spring.

Yes, I have read the story . . . and of half a dozen other Italian heroes. . . . That whole period lay in my early childhood and . . . was neither taught in school nor experienced in life with the sole exception of Garibaldi, whom we heard was of a band of Assassins. So with Kropotkin and the "Inter-

⁴ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins (R. W. Riis collection).

⁵ *Ibid.*

nationals"... You will presently show me heroes among my arch foes, the Germans. But I draw the line there. You are not going to enlist my sympathies in the cry of "United Germany," for I saw at close range the humbug of it as applied to Slesvig—even the fraud and the lie. So don't try that....

During the day he received a gift of flowers from the Gilders who remembered the anniversary, and some hours later called on these friends. His two notes follow: ⁶

524 N. Beech Street
March 5, 1906

BELOVED FRIENDS:

Your sweet flowers—the lilies she loved—came to cheer my loneliness just now, and made my heart tender. They shall stand in my window where the sun shines in, and when the spring comes I will plant them in her garden up on the hill where year by year they will unfold their message of love and friendship. God bless you both for thinking of her and of me on this day.

Ever your friend
JACOB A. RIIS

DEAR MR. GILDER:

Surely a grieving man is the most selfish brute on earth. I had not reached the sidewalk before it rushed in upon me what a wicked and thoughtless thing it was for me to tell you that story, with your child on the ocean. But you will forgive my selfishness. I had been seeing Her face all day. Your daughter, please God, will cross on summer seas and you will hear from her in two or three days that she is having a lovely time. So did our Clara; all our concern was needless. There was no danger.

My love to you always,

Your blundering friend
JACOB A. RIIS

⁶ Letters from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

Later in the month he returned to Post-Graduate and on March 18th while there wrote to his sister Emma: ⁷

In a week's time I am going back home again to start my work. But I will be careful. I never knew that Father suffered from heart trouble.

... Your letter I read with the feeling that comes to a man who still feels young, yet is old. ... I live in the old days that are no more but I would not have it otherwise. I am glad I lived and was young in *Her* days. She was the purpose of my life, but let it be. I see it cannot be as I would like. ...

And the windows! It is funny how difficult it goes for one in Denmark. America is my land after all. While they argue in Denmark about the windows we have already ours in here. Paid my debts for the Settlement House and yesterday had the luck to meet a rich American who had never seen a Dane before and he helped me with Pastor Andersen's little Danish Church in Brooklyn ... now his debt of \$4,000. will be paid and that will be another gift given in her memory.

In the same letter to his sister he refers to his offer to give Mrs. Riis's picture for the Museum located in the former Gjortz home. "Don't let me hear that they do not want Elisabeth's picture in the Museum, if they won't, it's the last straw and I shall just forget Ribe. Then I shall leave dear memories here where she lived her happy years and her people loved her and remember her from New York to California.... Did you remember it was Father's Birthday to-day? ..." ⁸

He left Post-Graduate to go to Massachusetts, and upon his return to Richmond Hill found that Mr. Gilder had called on him at the hospital: ⁹

⁷ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder (Miss Rosamond Gilder's collection).

March 29, 1906

MY DEAR MR. GILDER:

It was good of you to come over to the hospital. I went home Saturday, and have just come back from Mass., where I went to try if I could lecture yet. I could, and furthermore, I am better for it, much better. What the dickens—let us wear out, if we must, never rust. But I am going to go very easy this whole season. That much I concede to the doctor. I shall go to the deep woods somewhere and fish and paddle till frost comes again, and then I shall go on my last lecture trip. There is something I want to do this winter and for which I will raise the money; after that I shall be quiet and elderly in my ways. When are you going up to Four Brooks? Never mind telling me. I will come in some day and hear. I should like to spend a day or two with you there before I go away to the wilderness if you will let me.

Always yours,
JACOB A. RIIS

On May 11, 1906, he wrote to his sister Emma: ¹⁰

Today by the post I had sent a beautiful photograph of Elisabeth in her beautiful wedding clothes, the ones she wore when she was with the President in the White House and the ones she was laid to rest in, and so I would like her memory in the house where we were married and in the old town. . . . About us there is little to say—we are all well and it is Spring in our garden, and the white bush is in bloom, that shed its flowers as snow over Lammet's coffin when it was carried out. God alone knows how often I shall see it bloom, and her roses are in bud by my door. . . .¹¹

His health continued poor during the summer and he wrote to Emma on July 13th:

I have had another heart attack and my doctor in Chicago who understands me and my case better than anyone else

¹⁰ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

says that I must start now and get my heart repaired! Or I might die any old time, so now I am repairing. I am not in grave danger, but when all is said and done, isn't such a death better than a drawn out illness? And we know we must die when we are called upon; we are but poor sinners and glad when it is over, and will follow Him faithfully Who has my lamb. . . .¹²

The same letter contained a suggestion that he would like to buy the woods near Ribe where, as a boy, he had gathered nuts. He would have some money to spare and would like to turn over the property to the high school with the understanding that a committee of boys chosen by the boys make their own rules for the nut gathering. He hoped that this would bring about an annual Autumn Festival during which the community would come together.

During this year he had written some articles, among them a delightful account of the visit to the palace in Denmark, "King Frederick At Home," in the March 10th issue of *The Outlook*. For the March 3, 1906, *Charities and The Commons* he had written "Backing Up the President." In that article he referred to the depressing slums of Washington, the lack of laws against child labor in the District of Columbia, the lack of compulsory education in the city, and urged that some effort be made to turn Washington into the model municipality of the land. For the June 2, 1906, *Outlook* he had written "Boys' Fun in the Old Town," material which he incorporated later into his book about Ribe.

This summer he went to Cape Breton for his usual vacation. Although Riis was far from well and suffered from nervous fatigue, he made it a thrilling trip for young

¹² Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Reinsholm, July 13, 1906 (Dan-America Museum).

William who thoroughly enjoyed fishing in company with his father. As soon as he was able, late in September, he began his lecture tour. William was to go away to school and Kate was to board, for the housekeeping responsibility would be too heavy.

2

At this point some mention should be made of the big work which Riis had for years carried in behalf of his settlement house. While he was always willing to turn a hand to help in any social reform, he had a special tender spot in his heart for 48-50 Henry Street. He had given every encouragement to the many clubs functioning there. The work had grown tremendously in scope. Approximately 1,000 boys and girls, young men and women were getting a chance at wholesome fun and directed workshop activity.¹³ A kindergarten, domestic-science classes, a children's playground at the back, were doing a great work to meet the needs of the neighborhood. The time had come when a gymnasium was urgently needed. If they had such equipment, the settlement could form athletic clubs, and the youngsters could play games with youths from other neighborhoods. Riis and the other board members planned to have the children challenge both public- and private-school teams and thus further the democratic ideals of the house. Hence with such an aim he set about raising money and was successful. And so it was in the fall of 1906 that he was able to write to Dr. Robbins: "... I have got 10 schools (Groton, St. Paul, etc.) mostly in New England who give me \$200. each year for its ... support and something real good is going to come out of

¹³ See bibliography for Mr. Riis's articles on the settlement; Paul U. Kellogg, "What Jacob Riis and a Thousand Boys Are Up To," *Charities and The Commons*, XVII, pp. 167-170.



Photograph by Rudy Arnold

THE JACOB A. RIIS NEIGHBORHOOD SETTLEMENT
48-50 HENRY STREET, NEW YORK



Photograph by Rudy Arnold

JACOB A. RIIS PARK AT ROCKAWAY, NEW YORK
MARINE PARKWAY BRIDGE IN BACKGROUND

the partnerships between these rich ones and my poor ones. You wait and see! . . ." ¹⁴

The gymnasium was to bear the name of Theodore Roosevelt and was to be presented on his forty-eighth birthday. For the occasion Mrs. Roosevelt sent a large bouquet of pink and white roses from the White House garden, and Roosevelt wrote a message to the children: ¹⁵

The White House
Washington

October 20, 1906

MY DEAR RIIS:

May I thru you send a very warm welcome to the children of the East Side? I wish I could be with you at the opening of the Gymnasium in the Henry Street Settlement. As I cannot, may I thru you extend my heartiest good wishes to the boys and girls of the Settlement? That they may thoroly enjoy themselves while young and grow into useful men and women and true American citizens is the earnest wish of their friend,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

MR. JACOB A. RIIS
48-50 HENRY STREET
NEW YORK, N. Y.

At the opening Riis made a short address in which he told something of the work of the Settlement and of its aims. He gave Roosevelt's message which, he pointed out, was written in the new spelling with "thru" for "through." Then he said dryly, "I wrote the President that I thought his letter fine and his spelling vile." ¹⁶

3

Riis had the utmost respect for the work which the 1894 Tenement House Commission had accomplished

¹⁴ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins, Oct. 15, 1906 (R. W. Riis collection).

¹⁵ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

¹⁶ *The Sun*, Oct. 28, 1906.

under the direction of Richard Watson Gilder. He regarded it as a fine piece of pioneer work which had led to permanent reforms. Hence he was indignant at an attack made by William Randolph Hearst against the work of the Gilder Commission. In a lecture before a Y.M.C.A. audience in New York in October, 1906, he scored Mr. Hearst's statement in no uncertain terms. On this occasion a newspaper man wrote a humorous little account of Riis who in the midst of his emphatic remarks suddenly spied some one in the audience.¹⁷

"Why, how are you, Doctor?" he interjected. Then, turning apologetically to his audience, "The Doctor's a very old friend of mine, whom I haven't seen for years. What was I talking about?" "War" was the smiling answer. "Oh, yes, war," continued Mr. Riis. . . .

When that Christmas came, he was far away from home. He had continued in poor health all the fall and had decided that it would be better to rest during the holidays at St. Joseph's Sanatorium, Mt. Clemens, Michigan. There was not much to call him home anyway for the Richmond Hill house was rented and he had made other arrangements for the children. While he was recuperating he received a message from his sister Emma telling him that she had gone to the cloister to live. He replied, telling her how glad he was. He also wrote to Dr. Robbins:

As you see, I am a Mormon today. Day after tomorrow if all goes as planned, I shall be a "web-foot" in Oregon and then go down the Coast to So. Calif. where I shall rest the last half of February.

Yes—I agree with you altogether and though I can do nothing I am impatient to have to talk to with those who can. The whole thing seems to me wondrously simple if organized labor will keep its hands off. Let the Government (ours) ask

¹⁷ *The Sun* reference clippings.

of the immigrant on *the other side*, before he starts: "What can you do?" Well, then we want men who can do your work in So. Carolina, in Montana (or wherever it may be) — Will you go there? Yes! Then start him and see that he goes there—not pay his way but steer him to the place, *not* New York. The way things are now is worse than nonsense, and we can hardly stand it much longer. I did know the crowding was getting worse, but not that it was so bad. It is true I quit the moseying about and came home. What you say about the high rent however worries me more than I can tell. I always feel that we are on the wrong track, if all the tenement house reform comes to that only. Can you see any objection to my immigration scheme? . . .¹⁸

Riis felt increasingly troubled over the loneliness of his youngest boy. To his sister on May 22nd, he wrote:¹⁹

Vivi is going to stay with me. We are going to be together this summer. The dear boy—they told me in the school when I was visiting that he decorated his room for my arrival and I was to stay the night. In the middle of the night I heard a loud shriek; he stood on the floor and in his sleep shouted "Father is sick, Father is sick!" It touched my heart. I am all he has; he is a lonely little fellow who doesn't say much, but he doesn't brood. He is sweet in every way. . . .

At the time when personal matters were of much concern, he was in communication with Dr. Robbins about needed reforms in the city. He wrote on May 9th:

The Mayor is not hateful to me, but I have tried to pull several minor things through the City Hall this last year with less result than ever before. I think it is in great part due to the political feud that has raged there, and that he can't get things done without a supreme effort. I don't believe it is much good to go to the Mayor on this matter of street cleaning with C—— lying ill. . . . What do you think of an unceasing newspaper agitation; I mean by that enlisting a

¹⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins (R. W. Riis collection).

¹⁹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Reinsholm (Dan-America Museum).

paper which shall go at it daily with exposure of the actual conditions until we get to the point of a public remonstrance, unless things are bettered? . . .²⁰

On June 5, 1907, Kate was married at the Church of the Resurrection to Dr. Oscar Owre, the promising young Minneapolis surgeon, whom she had met on the boat three years before. It was a quiet affair with only the members of the family and a few close friends present. The devoted young couple were facing a happy future, and Riis was glad, even though this meant that he had now only William with him. During the same month newspapers carried a notice that Riis himself was to marry again.

²⁰ Letter from Mr. Riis to Dr. Robbins (Dr. Robbins' collection).

CHAPTER XXI

The Lecturer Comes Home Again

I

SURPRISING as it may perhaps seem in view of his idealization of his first wife, that he could have considered a second marriage, to his closest friends—among them the Roosevelts, Dr. Robbins, and the Gilders—it appeared but the natural course of events. While Riis's work had led him far and wide on lecture tours, he was distinctly a home-loving body, and his affectionate nature required the warm companionship of a woman.¹

It seemed providential that a charming and intelligent young woman appeared on the scene. She was Miss Mary Phillips, a St. Louis society girl who had been educated abroad. She was Riis's junior by about twenty-five years. She was a person of culture. Several years previously she had heard him lecture and had been greatly impressed. A little more than two years ago she had come to act as his secretary. During those hard days while he was trying to adjust himself after his first wife's death, he had found her energetic, cheerful, and understanding. She, in turn, had discovered him to be a lovable figure needing her help. Moreover she was devoted to the lad, William, and they had become fast friends. Hence with mutual feelings of admiration which developed into a deeper affection as time went on, Mr. Riis and Miss Phillips had come to

¹ Relatives and friends have kindly supplied personal information in this chapter.

the knowledge that they cared enough for each other to be married. His letter to Dr. Robbins tells of the approaching event:

Ipswich, Mass.

June 20, 1907

DEAR DOCTOR:

I want to tell you something, as a very old and beloved friend, which so far I have only told the children, for I want your understanding sympathy, as I have always had it: in late Summer, when Vivi is getting ready for his school, I shall marry Mary Phillips who has been my secretary and right hand in all I have tried to do these two years, and go back to the old home. I do not know whether or not you know her, but I want you to. I want you to come out to the house as you used to. I want to bring back as much of the old spirit as I can. It will be *home* again, please God, as long as I live. And I want you to learn to love her, for she is worth it. She loves my little boy and he has given his whole little heart to her. As much as is left of my own old heart, worn as it is, I have given her to keep with it.

Katie is married, as you know—I hope she informed you, but she was so wildly excited when he came so suddenly for her, that I can not be sure—Clara and her doctor are getting ready to carry out a plan they have harbored for more than a year, of moving to California. They have sold their house, and he is already gone. Thank God I shall not be alone altogether. I do not think I could stand it.

Will you say nothing about this for the present. I just want *you* to know. And I feel that you understand. I know that *she* does in her heaven, whose voice I shall hear again there. I want you to be glad with me, with Vivi and me, that there is to be a welcome for us once more in the old home, too, a voice at the gate calling out our names.

Give my love to your old mother and believe me always yours,

JACOB A. RIIS

I shall be here a couple of weeks, and then go west a little while. I am well.²

² Dr. Robbins' collection.

In July he wrote to his sister Emma telling of his plan to marry. The letter went on:

At Mary's suggestion I got a legal document written. The money I had saved for Lamb was put in the hands of two trustees for the children.... So now we are beginning from the first again. I have always what I need and more I do not wish. You ask why I do not write for the papers any more; hardly these two years, but, now when I am in the old home again, I will do so once more. This winter I must give many lectures and travel around... but after this I shall write more. I will always talk when there is something to talk about and no one likes talking better than I! But I have once more a good background to inspire me to write, a clever and understanding wife, and a dear wife, who can help me. I never wrote anything that I did not at once read to Elisabeth, and though she seldom corrected me, her sympathy and understanding would put any little thing right that might have been wrong; and when I no longer could do that, I stopped writing. Mary can do this. I am no good alone....³

They were married on July 29, 1907, at the Ascension Memorial Church at Ipswich, where the bride's family was passing the summer. Only Miss Phillips' immediate family and one or two close friends and William Riis attended the ceremony. After it, Mr. and Mrs. Riis and the boy went for a camping trip; later in the summer they paid a brief visit to the Gilders at Tyringham. Then they returned to open the Richmond Hill house.

Mr. Riis understood the difficult position of his second wife; he admired her for the deep understanding she showed of his loyalty to the memory of his first wife, and, as time went on, he developed an even greater affection and respect for her. He could rely on her critical judgment when he wrote articles, and he soon began to plan a number of new writings.

³ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

The character of their home was now as distinctly American as the first had been Danish. There was a little more formality, perhaps, but there was an easy courtesy, and 524 North Beech Street became once more open house for friends and a place of refuge for Jacob Riis. When he was there, the telephone rang busily, and Mrs. Riis had to protect him from many calls. Always there was the blessed memory of his first wife about the place; little things spoke of her—the knickknacks in the house, the trees, the flowers in the garden. As the months passed and her face slipped farther into the shadows, he still felt her presence near. He talked about her to his second wife, placed flowers before her picture. Sometimes in the twilight he would sit by the window watching the sun set and humming "Der Stars et Slot i Vesterled,"⁴ as he and Elisabeth, or "Mother" (he now referred to her by this name), had so often sung it together.

As time went on, he was happy in a very different sort of way from before. He thoroughly enjoyed the cozy hours at home in the evening. Friends would often come to dinner, and Jake would be in his element listening to an amusing story or entertaining them with an irresistible anecdote. He had the happy faculty of bringing out the best in people; he cast aside the dross and went straight to the gold.

When he had an afternoon to spare, he would hammer away in the garden at boxes for the starlings, which, in some strange way, had come at last to make him glad. Now and then he and Mrs. Riis went to the theater. Once, when they went to see Maude Adams in *What Every Woman Knows*, he was so affected by the play that he

⁴ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Reinsholm, Nov. 13, 1909 (Dan-America Museum).

kept getting smaller and smaller in his seat and finally was all huddled up, so that those around him were amused.⁵

Far from being subdued and solemn, Riis continued to enjoy every new experience with fresh zest. In fact, he was often so bubbling over with a new idea that Mrs. Riis felt she was older and that she stood in a maternal rôle to him.⁶ Mrs. Riis's affection for the youngster, William, helped to make the new adjustments happy. The boy was now in boarding-school, but he was enjoying the feeling that once more he had a home to come back to. His letters to the parents were full of enthusiasm over the prospect of vacations.⁷

2

In the autumn of 1907, Riis saw the beginning of a work in this country which he had suggested some time before—the use of Red Cross stamps for Christmas packages. On his trip to Denmark in 1904, he had found that seals were being used to raise money for needy consumptives. Just where the idea had originated was not clear, but Austria and Holland, too, were using stamps for charitable purposes. He was impressed with the sums of money raised and wrote a story for *The Outlook* (July 6, 1907) describing the project and urging that the United States adopt a similar plan.⁸ He believed that through the sale of stamps a considerable sum might be raised for carrying on the educational work of the Tuberculosis Association. His suggestion bore fruit; the American Red Cross and the National Tuberculosis Association became interested, and at Christmas, 1907, made a beginning by

⁵ Interview with Mrs. Riis, Jan. 4, 1934.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

⁸ J. A. Riis, "The Christmas Stamp," *The Outlook*, LXXXVI (July 6, 1907), pp. 511-514; writer's interview with Dr. E. T. Devine, July 28, 1933.

selling stamps in Delaware. From that start the great work was enlarged year by year.

3

The scope of Riis's work had now become nation-wide. By this time social reforms had come to be a familiar topic throughout the country. The muck-rakers had stimulated desire for change. New national organizations had come into being which served as clearing-houses for projects of every kind. At such gatherings as the National Conference of Charities and Correction, representatives came from all over the country to give testimony to the many movements under way in the different sections. Far from thinking that Riis's work in New York slums was local and of little value to the provinces, towns and cities regarded him as an expert who could give them encouragement and point the way to practical reform. He was welcomed everywhere,⁹ and it sometimes amused him to see the contrast between the way in which he was received now and the unfriendly treatment he had met with in 1877 at Elmira and elsewhere.¹⁰

His wide travels and keen observation kept him abreast of the march of progress, and he contributed numerous articles to the magazines telling of conditions as he found them. For *Charities and The Commons* he wrote "America's Civic Awakening" (February 15, 1908), "Head Off the Slum in the West" (March 7, 1908), and "How Helena Became a Clean City" (March 28, 1908). For *The Survey* (the same magazine under a new name), he wrote "Playgrounds in Washington and Elsewhere" (April 8, 1908)

⁹ Riis Papers (with comments) in R. W. Riis collection and in Russell Sage Library; J. A. Riis, "Experiences of a Popular Lecturer," *World's Work*, XVI (July, 1908), pp. 10490-10496.

¹⁰ He earned about \$10,000 a year gross from the lectures, enough to net a comfortable living.

and "The Plight of St. Louis" (May 9, 1908). In the July, 1908, *World's Work* he had an interesting sketch called "Experience of a Popular Lecturer."

In the course of his lecture tours, Riis was impressed by the eagerness he found to beautify the towns. The land, he said, "is stirred to-day by a desire to look well, that is working wonders..."¹¹ The chambers of commerce, the women's civic improvement societies, and a number of other civic bodies were doing big things. He also praised the work of Andrew Carnegie in giving attractive library buildings as a model and a stimulus to local communities.

Often he was introduced as the man whom Roosevelt had called the "most useful citizen in New York." Sometimes he was greatly amused over the newspaper comments following his talk. On one occasion he wrote: "I have not forgotten the newspaper critic in Jamestown who described me as 'a voluble Dutchman with a voice like a squeaky cellar door.' Nothing cheered me as did that; for it doesn't make any difference how it squeaks, they are there to hear . . . we are all enlisted for the war."¹²

One night, when he was to lecture in a small town on Lake Michigan, he found that his train would be two hours late. After telegraphing to the committee, he went to the diner and ate a leisurely meal. When the train finally did pull up at the station, he found a faithful committee waiting for him. He was led to the hall and much to his surprise, saw a patient audience "eating 'a mid-night lunch'" while¹³ waiting for him to arrive.

If he happened to be far away from home when the Christmas season was approaching, he tried to find some

¹¹ J. A. Riis, "Experiences of a Popular Lecturer," p. 10492.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10493.

¹³ *Ibid.*

unfortunate person to befriend. On one such occasion, when he was in California, the case that appealed to him was that of a poor Danish woman who was ill in a hospital. He called on his friend Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, who was then living in the West, and together they planned a happy Christmas celebration for the sick woman.

It was always to him an impressive experience to speak at a gathering of young people. In them, he felt, was the hope of the country:

Sometimes it is the colleges or the schools that I talk to. I can hear, as I write, the low rumble of assent from those audiences in the Harvard Union, in chapel at Bowdoin, at Ann Arbor, at Leland Stanford, that goes up when you speak to them of the men who are doing things for our country. . . . Like the tramp of thousands of young feet marching to their seats in one of our great schools, it tells you of the to-morrow that is coming . . . and when one has heard it once, his doubts are at rest. . . .¹⁴

4

Swelling buds on trees and the first whiffs of spring welcomed Jake Riis when he stopped off at home for a little while in March, 1908. It was good to be back after the long, wearying tour. His heart had been giving him some trouble, and he needed rest. As he and Mrs. Riis discussed plans for the summer, they decided on a trip to Nauheim, Germany, where he could have the advantages of the baths. William would accompany them, and they would make a trip to Ribe, for Mr. Riis wanted his wife to meet his relatives and old friends.

While in New York he attended an exhibit on housing congestion which was presented at the American Museum of Natural History. This exhibit—showing, as it did, tenement conditions that still existed—made a deep impres-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10495.

sion upon the public. Riis referred to it in a letter to Dr. Robbins: "...Yes, the congestion show is bully. I'm afraid, though, they have killed Marsh in getting it up. It is one thing I have against our social workers—they are so blamed social that the individual disappears..."¹⁵

It is impossible to mention all the activities in which he engaged while he was at home that spring; but a few will indicate the variety of his interests.¹⁶ On March 23, 1908, he attacked measures which were being introduced by Assemblyman Sheridan and others to put through a new tenement-house bill; for, he said, this bill would take all three-family houses out of the power of the Tenement House Law and would permit bakeries to do business again at night in tenement-house basements. He urged support for the anti-race-track bills in the Senate; for it had long been his belief that gambling was a public menace leading to crime. He spoke at a banquet given by the Playground Association of America in honor of Mrs. Humphry Ward. For *The Outlook* he wrote an article defending the Jacob Riis Settlement which had been criticized on the ground of showing race and religious prejudice and of spending large sums on workers' salaries; in his statement he outlined the democratic and neighborly work of the organization. A good deal of his time that spring was given to the case of a young Danish man whose back was broken; Riis, with the aid of friends whose interest he enlisted, succeeded in sending the young man home to Denmark.

In the summer of 1908, Mr. and Mrs. Riis and William made a trip to Europe. While they were in Copenhagen, Mr. Riis was presented to King Frederick at the palace

¹⁵ Letter dated March 14, 1908 (R. W. Riis collection).

¹⁶ Clippings and papers in Russell Sage Library and R. W. Riis collection.

of Charlottenlund by Mr. Egan, American Minister, and he transmitted a personal message from Roosevelt. He received an invitation to dine with the royal family, but illness prevented him from accepting. At Ribe he was able to look up many points for his next book, *The Old Town*, which was to be his contribution to the history of his native land. It was a pleasant vacation, on the whole, and he came back improved in health.

5

During the past year or so, Riis had continued to see Roosevelt as often as possible; but there was naturally not much opportunity for visits, on account of Riis's long absence on lecture trips. He never lost an opportunity, however, to act as a kind of good-will ambassador for his friend. When, early in 1908, it was thought that Roosevelt would run for a third term, Riis spoke from the platform in his favor. When it at last became known that Roosevelt would definitely not consider the nomination, Riis had hopes that he would enter the campaign for Mayor of New York City; but the suggestion came to nothing, and Roosevelt prepared to take a rest by going on a hunting trip in Africa.

Toward the end of 1908, Riis put the finishing touches on his manuscript of *The Old Town*, and on December 8th he wrote ¹⁷ to Mr. Gilder:

I have just finished the MS. for my "Old Town" book and it has occurred to me to send you the enclosed chapter with the request that you read it and see if you can use it for *The Century*. I do not suppose you can, for it may seem detached, without *raison d'être*. However no harm will be done. If by any chance you were to use it, I could offer material suggestive to the illustrator. The condition would go with it that it must

¹⁷ R. W. Riis collection.

be printed before or by July, say, since the book is to be finished in the autumn.

Anyway, I shall like it very much if you will read it. It is rather out of my beaten track. I have tried to present as in a vision the historic facts of King Valdemar's reign. They are exceedingly dramatic, though I may not have succeeded in setting them out so. I wish I could read it *to* you.

I am, you perceive, on my—this time rather weary journeys—for I did wish to stay home and write. But the need of going among the schools that help support my settlement sent me forth. On Dec. 17 I shall be home and shall speak in the afternoon at the old Colony Club to a band of women marshaled by Miss Annie Morgan—aren't you on the list of speakers. I wish you or Mrs. Gilder anyway would be there. I shall have my slides. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

Busy Round of Travels; Denmark Once More

I

MILE after mile of upland and valley, low-lying marshes and plains slipped by the eyes of the tired lecturer in those early months of 1909. Big cities and small, country hamlets and isolated farms, stamped their images upon his memory. He was distinctly cheered by the signs he saw of improvement in housing conditions and of a realization of the importance of playgrounds.¹ Attractive homes and parks enlivened many a dismal section, and even tiny railroad stations were beginning to plant flowers in old cinder beds. When he had checked off the last lecture from his list, he joyfully took the homeward trail. How happy he would be with his family and friends, not to mention the garden where he must dig around the roots of the prized roses!

The next few weeks passed by uneventfully in the quiet of home. He did get down to his writing, however, and on July 13th he completed a story which he discussed with Mr. Gilder:

Have you your Christmas number all planned and made up? If not, would you care to look at "The Burgomaster's Xmas?" an article I have just finished. It is built upon an incident of life in The Old Town, which I have long intended to write. You know, being no poet, I can not "fict." . . . If you have planned your number for this year, I would rather not

¹ J. A. Riis, "Experiences of a Popular Lecturer," *World's Work*, XVI (July, 1908), p. 10495.

send it to you, however, as Bok of the Ladies' Home Journal is insistent and I may thus stop his clamor.... My wife and I both send our love to you and Mrs. Gilder. Come out and sup with us when you can....²

Mr. Gilder suggested some change in the manuscript; but Riis did not think that could be done.

I am afraid I can't do it. It is I think, "that kind" of a story, old-fashioned like myself, and there isn't any more to it. I was a little doubtful about it myself about offering it to the Century, and wouldn't have done it but for few things: my promise to let you see first any Xmas stories I might have which does not imply that you are to buy them.... I would rather that you send it back to me—in all honesty, I would. If I sell it, I have made the fixed rate of five cents a word for all my writing; but I would a great deal rather The Century did not keep it. Some day next week I shall be in town and as I shall call up to see the St. Nicholas, I will come in and see you also. Keep it till then....³

Final pages of *The Old Town* were now complete, and the book soon went to press. In this book Riis sketched with much charm the days of his boyhood and youth in old Ribe. As an historical work the book has certain shortcomings; the author either relied upon memory or at any rate failed to give his documentary sources. But as a description of the customs of the medieval town it has remarkable vividness and it is an important aid in the study of that period in Danish life with which it deals.

On one of the long peaceful summer days in 1909 Riis wrote a touching letter to his sister Emma:

I have a letter still from dear Mother telling me about Elisabeth's confirmation—"in a black silk gown with just a gleam of white stockings above her shoes"... you spoke of

² Riis Papers (R. W. Riis collection).

³ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, July 23, 1909 (R. W. Riis collection).

the development of the pictures you saw in Mother—I mean my Elisabeth. . . . She was always the same loving, noble soul . . . don't you remember what she wrote in her first letter to me "we will strive together for everything that is noble and good. . . ." She made me all that I am. It isn't much but it is her work . . . keep her picture, Emma, I would far rather that you should have it than it should hang in the Museum. . . . There was always something sacred about her to me. . . .⁴

Farther along in the letter he wrote tenderly and appreciatively of his second wife. "And . . . Mary . . . of an entirely different sphere than myself—but I saw the genuine true Soul in her and I was not mistaken. . . . Mary is walking in the garden now, tending her roses. Roses, white lilies and larkspur are her favorite flowers, when the daffodils, lilies-of-the-valley and hyacinths are gone. She loves her garden and in that respect we are alike for I desire nothing better than to occupy myself with it, in peace. . . ."

In the fall of 1909 the baby who was to have blessed the second marriage died at birth. It was their only child, and Riis marveled at the fortitude of his wife in her great disappointment. Through their sorrow they were even more closely united in a loving companionship based on complete understanding.

Another sad occurrence at the end of 1909 was the death of Mr. Gilder. This beloved friend of so many years died of angina pectoris on November 18th.⁵ It was as if a member of Riis's own family had slipped away. Always retaining the little formality "My dear Mr. Gilder" in his letters, he had loved the man as a fine spirit in the cause of human good; he had admired the poet's sensitiveness to the beauty of life. For so many years he had

⁴ Letter dated June 28, 1909 (Dan-America Museum).

⁵ Interview with Miss Rosamond Gilder.

been in the habit of dropping in at the office of *The Century* for a little chat that he would have difficulty in believing that the familiar figure was no longer there. And the summers would be bare indeed without a visit at Tyringham.⁶

A few weeks after Mr. Gilder's death, his friends planned a memorial service at Mendelssohn Hall for Sunday, February 20, 1910.⁷ The program included organ and harp music, an introduction by Hamilton W. Mabie, addresses by Governor Hughes, Mr. Riis, Talcott Williams, and President Butler, and poems of Mr. Gilder read by Robert Underwood Johnson of *The Century* and the actor, J. Forbes-Robertson. Meanwhile a movement was on foot to raise a \$100,000 fund for fellowships in social and political science at Columbia University in memory of Mr. Gilder. A committee of forty-five was organized to appeal for contributions; Riis was one of the members.⁸

In a note which Mr. Riis sent to Mr. Gilder in July, 1909, he had written: "Yes, my life has been full of friendships that make it worth while—the Smiths, you and Mrs. Gilder, the Roosevelts. Truly, I have been blest and I am both grateful and ashamed. . . ."⁹

2

With *The Old Town* in the hands of the publisher, Riis had turned his attention to a group of stories about Denmark's heroes which he expected to publish during the year 1910. Early in the new year he wrote to his sister Emma telling her that he would probably visit Denmark in the summer, as he wanted to get material for the book.

⁶ Interview with Miss Rosamond Gilder.

⁷ A copy of the program is in the files at the New York Public Library.

⁸ *The Sun*, Feb. 22, 1910.

⁹ Letter from Mr. Riis to Mr. Gilder, July, 1909 (R. W. Riis collection).

Principally however, he was to make the trip in order to go to Nauheim. "... I have lots to do in Copenhagen concerning my hero stories book and will be busy. We will stay there eight to ten days and in Ribe, a week, maybe only six days. ... Mary is a great traveller and I am glad to let her do the arranging. It isn't long in Ribe, but long enough to go through the papers and have a long chat together. ..."¹⁰

Plans for the trip went through; as soon as his lectures were over, he and Mrs. Riis and William sailed for Denmark. On the pleasant August day when their train pulled into Ribe the old town received them with open arms; they were given the best rooms in the inn and Riis was so touched that he nearly wept. The cordial welcome extended at the Latin School was equally moving and he was particularly gratified by the rector's tribute to Theodore Roosevelt.

On leaving Ribe they traveled down into Germany, where as he expressed it, "I always walk with a chip on my shoulder, for I cannot forget the Great Robbery of my childhood. ..."¹¹ Interestingly enough, the "old chip" seems to have been pretty well knocked off at this visit for he was completely disarmed by the friendly people who were so kind everywhere.

Later in the summer the three travelers had a happy trip through Switzerland and Italy. Riis had little difficulty in making himself understood while traveling through foreign countries.¹² He seemed to have a natural gift for words. Probably his thorough grounding in the classics gave him such a knowledge of word roots that he was able to make rapid progress in learning. By the time

¹⁰ Letter in Dan-America Museum.

¹¹ J. A. Riis, "A Kindly Journey," *The Outlook*, XCVI (Dec. 31, 1910), p. 1021.

¹² Interview with Mrs. Riis, Jan. 4, 1934.

he had been in Italy a few days, he had managed to pick up the rudiments of Italian and was able to read the Italian newspaper with ease. Moreover, his quick mind and friendly manner made it possible for him to adjust himself very readily to new lands and new faces.

They returned to New York late in the fall in time for Riis's new lecture tour. At the same time he completed the final pages of *Hero Tales of the Far North* and sent it to the publishers. For *The Outlook* (December 31, 1910) he wrote an article, "A Kindly Journey," about his recent visit to Germany.¹³

3

Riis was one of a score of well-known men who organized the institution known as the Boy Scouts of America.¹⁴ On an afternoon in May, 1910, he sat with the others around a table and discussed the need for such a society. He was especially impressed with the "Good Turn Daily" feature of the proposed program, since he felt that this motto contained the core of the whole plan.

Municipal affairs had been controlled by Tammany since 1904, when Seth Low was defeated by George B. McClellan. In 1910 William J. Gaynor, another Tammany man, was elected. Here and there through Riis's notes we find references to the contacts he had with the Mayor in the effort to bring about further housing and playground reforms; but in the main he believed that Tammany must be ousted if tangible results were to be obtained.

New York papers often found what Mr. Riis had to

¹³ Other articles of the year 1910 included "The People's Institute of New York," *The Century*, April, 1910; "The Ghost of the Heath," *The Outlook*, July 23, 1910; "The Knight Errant of the Sea," *The Outlook*, Aug. 22, 1910.

¹⁴ J. A. Riis, "The Boy Scout Movement," *The Outlook*, CV (Oct. 25, 1913), pp. 412-421; *New York Tribune*, June 25, 1910.

say about Roosevelt interesting news. Occasionally they painted him as a prophet of a new day for his friend. For instance, an editorial in *The World* on November 15, 1910, under the title "Soldiers Three" said: "Jacob Riis, whose orisons are made each morning with his face toward Oyster Bay, sees a political future full of promise for Mr. Roosevelt. 'There will be a great new party,' he says, a party 'based on the principle of progressiveness,' and the ex-President will be its leader. This party 'will stand for men and not for money.' It will sweep the country in 1912...."

4

For some time Riis had had the feeling that holiday observances were losing some of their meaning through a spirit of rowdyism which he found in certain quarters. No one was more interested than he in properly observing all religious and patriotic festivals; his emotions were deeply stirred by the sight of candles on a Christmas tree, the ringing of bells to toll out the old year, or the raising of a flag in a public square. But he wanted to keep these treasured occasions as he remembered them from the past. He had agitated for a safe and sane Fourth of July to reduce the menace of accidents in crowded streets, and he urged the public to replace the noise-making of New Year's Eve with the singing of songs at community centers. He believed that the people were old-fashioned enough at heart to make such a plan a success, once they got used to it.

With such ideas in mind he and some friends tried the plan of singing carols on Christmas Eve in the streets of Richmond Hill.¹⁵ They hitched up a horse to an old furniture wagon and made their way about the town

¹⁵ Letter from Miss Bertha C. Pedersen, Oct. 13, 1934.

serenading the neighbors with hymns. Some of the joys of his long-ago childhood came back that night as he helped to spread the good cheer.¹⁶

Although numerous parks and playgrounds now afforded "lungs" for the congested districts of New York, there was need for more. For years Riis had hoped that one or more of the islands¹⁷ in the East River might be converted into a municipal recreation spot, but that day still seemed far off. In 1911 he served as chairman of a special committee of the Playground and Recreation Association of America to look into the matter of a public shore resort. In this connection, he called on the Mayor to discuss the possibility of the city's purchasing a tract from the Brighton Beach Racing Association. The Mayor said the price of \$2,250,000 asked for the property was too high, while Riis insisted that the price was fair.¹⁸ In the end results were not immediately forthcoming, but the work of Mr. Riis and his colleagues stimulated the public interest and prepared the way for the purchase by the city of a tract of land on Long Island which was later made into a park and given the name of Jacob A. Riis.¹⁹

¹⁶ A Christmas tree was set in Madison Square, December, 1912, and a New Year's celebration took place around it. J. A. Riis, "Rescuing our National Festivals," *The Craftsman*, XXIII (February, 1913), pp. 496-500.

¹⁷ J. A. Riis, "The Island Playgrounds of the Future," *Charities*, XI, pp. 206-7.

¹⁸ *The World*, Sept. 1, 1911.

¹⁹ Mr. Riis wanted to see a park at Neponsit on the Rockaway Peninsula. Shortly after his death in 1914 the laying out of such a park was proposed. The Navy Department was interested in the area for use in coast defense. After numerous disputes extending over about fourteen years, the park was developed beginning in 1930. (The city had acquired title to about 262 acres of land.) The first season began in 1932, but the park was opened with formal ceremonies in May, 1933. (*New York Herald Tribune*, May 7, 1933).

CHAPTER XXIII

Happy Valley

I

RICHMOND HILL no longer seemed like the country. New houses were going up all around, and the section had lost much of its suburban quiet of a decade before. Hence Mr. and Mrs. Riis began to speak of moving farther away into the real country. They would like a farm for the summers; during the winter months, at least for the present, they would keep the Richmond Hill house open. Very cautiously they began to make inquiry lest the price of land be set too high. Finally after some months of studying Agricultural Bureau pamphlets, Mrs. Riis singled out thirty or forty farms in New York State and in Massachusetts as possibilities; and in the autumn of 1911, they went on a tour of inspection. They were tempted by the many attractive sites; but at last they came to the spot ideal, a 200-acre farm at Barre in Worcester County, Massachusetts. The house was a hundred years old, with large rooms and two great chimneys; it had simple lovely lines and was made of strong timber. Behind it there was a hill which rose to a thousand feet, with slopes that would be just the thing for fruit trees. The whole farm was shut in by pine woods, and on two sides it was bounded by a brook in which small trout frisked. There was no question about it; the place was irresistible. They drove up to the agent's door and shortly thereafter closed the deal.

In a magazine article, "Our Happy Valley,"¹ published in *The Craftsman* he told of details of the purchase. They paid \$3,500 for the property, once assessed at \$9,000. To begin with, they had to build a barn, a shed, and two tenant houses, and dig a well at great expense. In addition, they had to buy a full stock of wagons and agricultural tools, an extra horse and several cows. All told, the improvements cost several times the price of the property, and the Riises spent most of their surplus. They would wait until next summer to move in.

2

Riis's treasured friendship with Dr. Jane E. Robbins has often been referred to in the course of these pages. They had a mutual understanding which made it possible to work with the greatest harmony in the numerous welfare activities in which both were interested. Each had a great admiration for the work of the other. On one occasion, however, in December, 1911, they had a difference of opinion on which they could not compromise. There had been a strike in New Jersey. During the affair some of the strikers had placed dynamite which had exploded and had killed several employees. Bouck White, a radical leader, had sympathized with the union. On a later occasion, a New York preacher had, it was reported, made some defense of White's action. Riis was terribly upset. While he believed in the labor movement and in procuring satisfactory conditions of work and better pay for the toiler, he had little use for measures of violence, and referred to the deaths as a case of murder. His indignation flared up, and he felt that no defense should be made for any one who entered the strike. Dr. Robbins did not agree

¹ J. A. Riis, "Our Happy Valley," *The Craftsman*, XXV (Nov. 1913), pp. 143-151; (Dec. 1913), pp. 262-273.

with all of his conclusions, and they argued without result. On December 21, 1911, he wrote to her:

For once we are hopelessly separated—no, not hopelessly, for I believe your strong common sense will leave you on firm ground in this matter.... For a generation we have tried to work out of it all toward a better understanding, toward peace, and who shall say we have not come a long way.... And right when we seem to be turning the point and getting into the smooth water, come these cheap assassins with their hideous pretense of “principle” and would drown half the world in a sea of blood, the other half in a smother of senseless—oh, well, I absolutely haven’t any words for it....²

Before long, however, Riis had cooled down, and we find him writing to his friend on December 25, 1911:

DEAR DOCTOR:

... It was in mind all yesterday that I would ring you up and shake hands, even over the telephone, lest I had wounded your feelings by my letter. I love you too much to have you harbor even the least feeling of resentment against me and of all things at Christmas time, and so don’t let us talk about it, for in this matter I am not going to yield an inch. And I don’t have to advise with Dr. Adler about it, my mind is entirely clear on the rights and the wrongs of it... the opinion of Dr. W. is false and must *never come true* or in the revolution that would then be bred, the whole of organized society would perish, and the product I shudder at. We can and will right our wrongs in an orderly way or the republic is a mockery.... What the men of the Heywood strike really want and those others who condone such murderous [actions?] is the complete smash-up of things as they are, and that I shall resist unto the last drop of blood that is in me....

I know no one in whose soul it [the Gospel] lives and shines more than in yours, my dear doctor, and therefore it is with more than its ordinary meaning that I wish you a happy holiday....³

² Riis letters (R. W. Riis collection).

³ *Ibid.*

Their difference was entirely forgotten when on January 6, 1912, he wrote "...the chances are two to one that I can come in and give you a lift [at a meeting] I return your Italian lad's letter. Yes, that is a wonderful record. You have something to show for your work,—I have too, by proxy. Sometimes, literally, the echo of my career comes back from the past to me as an empty storm wind that left nothing in its wake and it is hateful to think. . . ." ⁴

He went on a lecture tour during the remainder of the winter, but by May he was in New York. His schedule for that month is interesting:

May

- 5 Amherst Agri. Coll.
- 10 Miss Wald
- 15 Dr. Robbins
- 16 A.I.C.P. Staff
- 9 A.M. C.A.S.
- 18 Greenwich H. near Warren
- 21 Bryant Square Mrs. Lowell Memorial ⁵

At last, late in May, 1912, they went to the farm. A new adventure was opening up; whither would it lead? His account of their arrival on Saturday afternoon when the hired help had departed for the day has something of the "back to nature" ring in it. Accustomed to city ways, both of them, they had to toil at heavy manual labor. The former society girl made plans for a profitable season. Mr. Riis referred to his wife as "Mistress Polly" and as "The Farmer." He told humorously of her struggle with "Lady," the temperamental horse, and of the numerous small incidents which made up the life of the farm. His carpentry work was a help, and his own particular pride

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

was the potato cellar which he made out of an old cider mill.

Here on a farm that summer, they were far away indeed from the pressure of tenement crowds. There was not even one immigrant workman on the farm; the nearest was five miles away at the woolen mills. Twice Riis had to go to New York on business, but the rest of the time he put in as an amateur farmer and in writing some magazine articles.

During this summer he received a letter from Mr. R. U. Johnson of *The Century*, who wanted him to write an article about newsboys. Riis agreed to do so and called attention to remedial legislation which had been passed; he would bring the story of the newsboy up to date. He also agreed to write an article on tenements. Yet it was easy to see that at the moment of writing to Mr. Johnson he was much taken up with farming. In a note at the end he said: "... I am raising potatoes, and whereas I struggled all these years with bosses and politicals I am now fighting the blight and the potato bug and winning out. If only we could have some rain. The everlasting sunshine of this Massachusetts summer is getting on my nerves. ..."

There was a constant element of uncertainty over the crops. Would fickle nature send down drenching rains and soak the potato cellar? Would frost nip the vines before they matured and turn the fat white of their potatoes to rot? If all went well, they might lay up fifteen hundred bushels to help pay debts. If they failed, it would mean beginning all over again in the weary struggle to succeed. If they could win, they would have the security of a farm and satisfying green acres about them. If they should lose, he would have to take up his satchel and continue his rounds. They must, somehow, win by hard effort. His

letter to Emma on Sept. 7, 1912, is almost an epic of the soil:

DEAR EMMA:

I have just received the enclosed letter. If I remember correctly I gave you permission to translate "The Burgomaster's Christmas." Have you done it or are you going to do it and will you be good enough to write to Mrs. Holmes that I have given you the right to translation and you can give it to her or not just as you wish. Will you see to this please and not forget it because I will not write to her.

We are well. I have never had a busier summer. For three months I have worked with men and horses on our estate. Finally, it is beginning to look like something. Mary's energy spends itself on the soil, but mine over the buildings and the stones which have to be removed from the fields. This summer we have had frost several nights each month and the three last frosts in August almost killed our potatoes. Upon them rests our hope of making money. The third night when the thermometer fell below freezing Mary got up and went out with the hired man to our best potato field which lies lower than the others and therefore was in greater danger and she built fires around and in the field of wet wood and sawdust so that there was a thick blanket which lay as a covering over the field. There I found them at four o'clock in the morning. They had been out the whole night and she was wet with dew. But they saved the potatoes. Doesn't she deserve to have success? But what is success without just that sort of energy which fights and conquers? I am to go out to make speeches for Roosevelt. I do not know if he will be elected but I would rather go down to defeat with him than win a world victory with anyone else. And there are thousands of others who feel the same way. So you see even if he doesn't get elected we win any way—the principle. And that is what he is after. And next time he will be President. That means I must live four years longer so as to take part in it. Mary is in Syracuse in our own state as delegate at the State Convention. There are a number of women there for the first time in our political history and I am glad they chose her of their own accord of our district, for she both will and can help.

What curious difference I sometimes think there is between the wife of my youth and Mary and yet how alike they are in essential even in many personal traits. God has been good to me. Love and friendship have I had in full measure and I am deeply indebted therefor....⁶

By the time frost came they had harvested their crop, and it was time to return to Richmond Hill. Riis was to resume his lecture tours and would not be able to stay long at home. At this time the 1912 presidential campaign was under way with Wilson and Taft running on the Democratic and Republican tickets respectively, and Theodore Roosevelt heading the Progressives. Of course, Riis had faith that Roosevelt would win and found many opportunities to speak in his behalf. On Election Day he returned from some lectures to Richmond Hill to vote, and that night called at the Bull Moose Headquarters in New York, only to hear disappointing news. While Riis admired Wilson, he would have preferred to have Roosevelt at Washington, and shortly after the election began to make plans to support Roosevelt in 1916.⁷

It is probably no exaggeration to say that Riis was still in 1912 the foremost advocate of housing reform in the country. As has been indicated before, he was only one of many thousands interested in the subject; but his writings had so stimulated the imagination of the public, that his name gave weight to any movement in behalf of slum clearance. Hence it is not surprising that three New York newspapers asked him to cover the National Housing Conference⁸ at Philadelphia early in December, 1912. His

⁶ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Reinsholm (Dan-America Museum).

⁷ Interviews with Mr. R. W. Riis.

⁸ This was the second national housing conference. The National Housing Association had been organized a little over two years before with R. W. deForest as head. (J. A. Riis, "The Nation-wide Battle Against the Slum," *The Survey*, Dec. 21, 1912.)



Kaiden-Kamoujian Studios

MRS. JACOB A. RIIS

story⁹ "The Nation-wide Battle Against the Slum" was lively and concrete. A number of cities had got rid of some of their hopeless old tenements, he reported.¹⁰ For instance, Washington had torn down 1,503 since 1907, Boston 1,138 within eleven years, and Cleveland 220 in a single year. But, he added, the National Capital still had 275 alleys left in which the infant mortality amounted to 375 in each thousand as compared with 157 per thousand in houses fronting on the street. In conclusion, he urged a housing law to cover all the dwellings in Washington. "Bigness is no cause for pride," he said; in the end, "only fitness is."¹¹

Complying with Mr. Johnson's suggestion he had written "The New York Newsboy" in which he showed changes for the better as a result of legislation. The article, as published in *The Century* for December, 1912, brought conditions up to date, indicating that an effort would be made during this winter to shorten the young workers' hours.¹²

During the last weeks of 1912 he completed the article which appeared later in *The Century* under the old familiar title "The Battle with the Slum." In it he made a strong plea for playgrounds and improved housing conditions. While the death-rate in the tenements had reached its lowest point in 1912, he said, there were still more than 60,000 windowless rooms in Greater New York. The fight must be waged against tuberculosis, he declared, and to combat that dread disease something must be done to regulate the dangerous conditions in sweat-shops. The city must prevent home manufactures; at present more than

⁹ *The Survey*, XXIX (Dec. 21, 1912), pp. 349-351, reprinted from *The Sun*, Dec. 8, 1912.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² J. A. Riis, "The New York Newsboy," *The Century*, LXXXV, p. 250.

11,000 licenses were being given to tenements and there were only ten factory inspectors on duty. He suggested that women, as the shoppers, could refuse to buy goods produced in unsanitary and unfair conditions, and he urged the public to support the Consumers' League, which was trying to procure better conditions of labor.

Recently his writings had included several articles on Danish background and history: "Niels Juel's Chair," "The Old King and the New," "Children of the Danish Heath."¹³ In these articles his intense love for the old country expressed itself. Nostalgia for his native land spoke through the lines.

3

Late in January, 1913, it became generally known that Riis was to leave New York. A despatch from Boston to a New York newspaper reported that it was his intention to give up his residence in New York on April 1st and make Worcester County his permanent home. "Roosevelt's Friend Will Become a Massachusetts Farmer," a caption read.¹⁴ At the same time some mention was made of the fact that a progressive club would shortly be organized in the county and that Riis might be made president of it.

That he did not expect to discontinue his interest in New York affairs was quite apparent, nevertheless. On April 4th he made an impassioned appeal against cuts in charity appropriations, drawing special attention to the need of a farm colony for tramps.¹⁵ Again, on July 25th

¹³ More detailed information is given in the bibliography.

¹⁴ *The Sun*, January 28, 1913.

¹⁵ New York *Tribune*, April 4, 1913. "When the bill to establish a farm colony for tramps was passed last winter I felt how she [Mrs. J. S. Lowell] would rejoice could she know. And now this committee of the Governor's appointing would take that from us. They talk coldly of that class of people. I was once of that class of people—I slept in those hells the police lodgings..." he said.

he was named as one of the new members of the Citizens' Municipal Committee which was seeking to bring about Fusion against Tammany in the next campaign. Indeed, it would have seemed strange to think of him apart from the pulse of affairs in the great city.

Upon the completion of his lecture tour he went to restful Pine Brook Farm for the summer. There life was cheerful and bustling with many activities. William was at home from college, and Mrs. Riis's mother, whom Riis found most congenial, had come to make her home with them. He would have liked to have his other children nearer. Clara and her husband were now living in California. Ed was successfully doing newspaper work on the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*.¹⁶ Kate with her husband and family was living in far-off Minnesota. John, now interested in a newspaper career, brought his wife for a visit.

Years later, John's wife recalled her first glimpse of Jacob Riis that summer. He was out in the yard walking with a cane.¹⁷ To her he seemed quite old. As he went, he shooed the geese from his path. When he caught sight of her, he welcomed her kindly and smiled.

During this year the number of his articles dwindled somewhat. In addition to the previously mentioned "The Battle with the Slum," he wrote "A Real Lucky Penny" for the July 26th issue of *The Outlook*. In this he called attention to a happy custom in Denmark of presenting a penny to the father at the birth of each new baby. In return the parent sent a post-office order for as much as he could afford, to be given to the needy blind. Riis suggested that the same custom be adopted in the United States. He also wrote an article on "The Boy Scout Move-

¹⁶ Interviews with family.

¹⁷ Interview with Mrs. John Riis, Sept., 1933.

ment" for the October 25, 1913, issue of *The Outlook*, and an appealing account of the human side of poverty, which appeared in *The Independent*, December 4, 1913, under the title "The Heart of New York."

On December 14, 1913, he wrote what appears to be his last letter to Emma: ¹⁸

Now Christmas comes again and we dance in our thoughts around the tree, holding each other's hands. Yes, it is just a little while now, but let us keep tight hold, for the chain breaks so easily. God be praised that in the end it means joining many dear ones that are waiting on the other side. The best thing about Christmas when we become old, even then there is sadness in it, is that it forces us to turn our eyes to the Lord at Christmas, the Eternal Blessed Child, "the bough on the tree of life stands green with lights like birds upon the twig." I can still hear Father's voice humming that, can you? . . . Yes, I am well again and I have been out lecturing. But you are right. I cannot do it in the way I could before and the risk is really too great. On the last journey I caught a terrible cold. Had that turned into pneumonia it would have been over with my heart. But it is, of course, my livelihood.

We are banking everything on getting our farm in such shape that it will pay itself so that in my old age I shall have security. Twelve cows are now in our stable, and before we are through there ought to be twenty-four. Then we shall have what we need. I am very glad that that window has been opened for me in my old age. . . .

And the letter ended: "... With good will toward mankind, a happy Christmas, from your brother, Jacob."

And so came the year 1914, the year that marked the beginning of the World War. That year brought the close of Jacob Riis's life. In January he was a patient at Battle Creek. Then he continued on his lecture tour, going west

¹⁸ Letter from Mr. Riis to Miss Reinsholm, Dec. 14, 1913 (Dan-America Museum).

to Chicago and south to Texas and Louisiana.¹⁹ While in the South he became ill and found he could not go on. Again he became a patient at Battle Creek and while there suffered an attack of bronchitis which almost proved fatal. Though a sick man, he kept up his correspondence. It is rather characteristic of him that in one letter he asked President Wilson to extend leave of absence to a young woman patient at Battle Creek who feared to lose her job because of her protracted absence. But in the main it was a fight for his life.

So long had he been subject to heart attacks that he expected to recover from this condition. Weak and hardly able to stand the trip, he wanted to go home. His wife and William, hoping, yet fearing at the same time, helped him to make the journey to Barre. At home in the early spring on the lovely Massachusetts farm, he rallied, only to relapse. A deluge of letters and telegrams wishing him speedy recovery poured in from friends, among them Roosevelt. Anxious days followed for his family. He was weaker, sinking, and on May 25, 1914, he died.

His funeral was conducted with the simplicity that had marked his nature. The choir sang "Hark, Hark, My Soul" and "Abide With Me," two of his favorite hymns. A brief service was read; and he was borne to "God's Acre," not far from Pine Brook Farm where he had expressed a wish to be buried.

To the end Jacob Riis enjoyed life, even if a fleeting sadness had sometimes passed over his face when he thought of the days that were no more and of the possibility that death might strike at any time. He was planning a good ten years more at work to help the underprivileged. At the time of his death he was preparing an article on

¹⁹ Mr. Riis's pocket diary (R. W. Riis collection).

the play movement for a newspaper syndicate.²⁰ His last piece of published writing, an article called "The Story of Sea Breeze" in the May 9, 1914, issue of *The Outlook* told of the triumph after long years of the plan for a larger hospital for crippled children, at Coney Island.

On May 27, 1914, Dr. Tracy wrote a letter to Mrs. Riis: "... I want to remember Riis as I saw him for the last time. . . . I want to remember him as he was, still alert and energetic, even if a little subdued by his affliction, when he bade me good-by at the entrance of the residence of his masseur, with his cheerful 'Well, so long, Doctor.' " And that is how we prefer to leave him.

²⁰ Editorial comment (foot-note) accompanying Mr. Riis's "The Old Order Changeth," *Playground*, VIII (March, 1915), pp. 415-417 (posthumous article).

CONCLUSION

MANY years have passed since Jacob Riis was laid to rest. Social work has become more highly organized and more rich in techniques. New fields of research have been opened up through psychiatric and psychological knowledge. Public welfare, social insurance, have become watchwords on every tongue. To-day, reformers talk of scientific planning and social engineering with sincere belief that social conditions can be controlled. Regional planning boards are mapping out city beautifuls and charting the way for clearance of slums. It all seems rosy at first glance; yet we know that the millennium in social reform is still far from being attained. More skill is needed, more devoted effort on the part of those who serve. The cheerful fighting spirit of Jacob Riis would not come amiss at the present time.

To measure Jacob Riis's contribution is a difficult task—in fact, it is impossible to measure it exactly. Thousands who have been affected by what he said have never been heard from by the public. Any evaluation of his work is hampered, too, by the fact that he did not stand as a single reformer, but was part of a large movement which included hundreds of other men and women devoted to the cause. There are, however, some objective evidences of his work. The settlement which he helped to found has continued to give friendly advice and to promote a neighborly spirit. Mulberry Bend Park stands in the place of a row of filthy tenements; mothers roll their baby carriages along its paths, and white-faced children breathe more

easily in its fresh air. Within easy reach of New York's crowded streets is the park named for Jacob Riis in recognition of his untiring effort to secure a playground for the people. Truant schools, provisions for vagrants, bespeak his zeal and that of the men and women who strove together with him.

Riis's ideas and accomplishments in the way of reform were not unique. The man had, however, a singular power of dramatic appeal, so that his stories were exquisitely human little documents which touched even the hard of heart. In his books and in his magazine articles, he combined human-interest appeal with telling figures, and thus helped to awaken not only New York but other cities the country over to the need of eliminating at least the worst evils of life in the slums. His lectures, delivered in practically every state in the union, stirred innumerable impulses toward reform.

Riis was not a prig in his writings—far from it. He preached Christian sociology, and he prayed over conditions which he found; but he was apt to preach and fight at the same time, and he had no air of self-righteousness. His sense of humor lightened many tales which in less skilled hands might have appeared too moralistic. While he condemned vice and other evils that were common in the slums, he could not have brought himself to read a moral lecture to the poor. He loved human beings; their joys and their sufferings were his own. As vivid as characters in the novels of Dickens are some of the figures that Riis makes live for us—Mrs. Ben Wah, a testy old creature living alone with her parrot, but enjoying life to the very end; little Katie, who scrubbed—nothing but a wisp of a child, with her droll face and serious smile; Tony, the utterly beguiling street urchin hurling mud at the stained-glass windows of St. George's until some one

handed him a flower and he dashed away to his slum home. Always there is tenderness for the young and compassion for the old, and understanding for the man convicted of crime.

With his fellow men Riis readily became companionable. A new acquaintance developed into a friend in no time at all, because Jake had no airs. His life as reporter had accustomed him to the casual give and take of human experience. He liked to talk and he loved a good story. He enjoyed the comradeship of men but he needed the advice and friendship of women, who always seemed to him to dwell on a somewhat higher plane than that of his own sex.

Riis has been called a muck-raker of the earlier days. Certain it is that his 1890 articles condemning tenement conditions bear striking resemblance to the ringing accounts of reformers of the 1902-10 period. He excoriated political corruption and social malpractice. Not all of his work was given to the public in dramatic fashion; he often got his results by quietly plugging away at committee meetings and by talking with people whose interests were akin to his own. He exposed evils and, at the same time, pointed the way to constructive reform.

Riis's sustained optimism may seem astonishing in view of the trials which he suffered in the first years in this country. He was confronted with all sorts of hardships—hunger, business failure, cruel treatment, and so on—and he showed an extreme sensitiveness to such conditions the rest of his life. The urge to talk about his outcast dog never left him. In those early days he was almost pathetically eager to make good, so that his wife's people would hear of his success and give up their objection to him. As police reporter he saw the drab conditions of life, unrelenting tragedy and grim realism. He saw municipal

corruption and a train of accompanying evils. He witnessed the dreary sweat-shop labor of thousands of immigrants who had come to the new world in the ardent hope of better days, only to find themselves bound day after day to the work of the machine. It was enough to make the most optimistic shudder; many writers, indeed, had succumbed to the depressing picture and were describing the scenes without color or hope. But this was not true with Riis; America chastised him in those early days, but she gave him his chance at the same time. Truly, this was the promised land for him. His ardent patriotism for his adopted country found expression in boosting the man whom he regarded as an ideal citizen, Theodore Roosevelt. He found challenging work; his home life was happy; he made good, and success brought larger opportunities to serve. Perhaps then his optimism is not so incomprehensible after all.

Because he identified himself so thoroughly with American reforms, Riis is better known here than in Denmark. His name is highly respected in the latter country, but he is not an outstanding national hero. Ribe has honored him by placing a tablet over the door of the house where he was born, and he is regarded as a home-town boy who made good and reflected credit on the community. Perhaps his reform work in New York would have received wider attention in Denmark but for the fact that that country had launched many measures of social legislation in the 1870's, 80's and 90's; interest in the domestic situation may have kept people from taking as much interest in what was being done across the sea. Riis's books have never been as widely read in Denmark as in America.

Jacob Riis was a plain man. That he was limited in some ways is obvious enough: the niceties of literary taste were beyond him; he cared little for the forms; he had

small interest in music—in fact, he hardly knew one tune from another. He rarely went to the theater. He was content to live in a world which contained many beloved friends and a loyal home group. He was satisfied when he could do something to better the lot of his fellow man. He did not feel the need for mechanical amusements: he found zest in the sparkling white of a snowball hurled from the mountaintop; a ragamuffin leaning on a battered crutch was more precious to him than the fine-spun drama of a Broadway stage.

The old Mulberry Street office has long since been torn down. Police Headquarters and the Health Department are no longer housed across the way. But farther down the street push-cart peddlers still cry their wares, and men and women, and babies, too, still crowd the narrow sidewalks in front of dingy buildings. Many of the tenements have gone; but others are left. In those dark doorways that remain, there hovers the spirit of a buoyant middle-aged man. He wears a drooping mustache, and his near-sighted eyes peer through a pair of spectacles. He is poking at an old bundle of rags and papers, half hidden in the shadows. Now he is groping his way up the stair to the hovel where a sick child is feebly trying to breathe. Yes, Jacob Riis is still there with his message.

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APPENDIX

SOME EXCERPTS FROM MR. RIIS'S POCKET DIARY *

Calendar 1904

JANUARY

- 1 Come now, New Year and let's
 see how we can get on together.
 If you'll behave I will. But I
 warn you no tricks!
- 6 Lawrence Mass Redp
- 12 Puritan Club Bklyn
- 13 Afternoon Dr. Abbott 3 PM
- 15 Torrington Conn (Red)
 Battle
 10 AM Settlement Henry St
- 18 Richmond, Ind
- 19 ...
- 20 DeKalb Ill
- 22 Lake Forest Ill
- 23 Godfrey, Ill.
- 27 Greeley Col
- 28 Boulder Col
- 29 Pueblo Col
- 30 Denver
 banquet YMCA
- 31 Denver YMCA

FEBRUARY

- 1 Denver
 Battle
- 2 Colorado Springs
 Battle

* Originals in R. W. Riis collection.

- 8 Andover, Mass Redp.
- 9 Burlington Vt (own)
- 12 Hackensack (own)
Battle
- 17 Lawrenceville NJ
- 18 Coatesville Pa
- 19 West Chester, Pa.(own)
Tony
- 20 Holidaysburgh Penn
- 21 Huntington Penn
- 22 T... Pa.
- 23 Beaver Falls Pa
- 24 Toledo O
- 25 Bucyrus O
- 26 Findlay O
- 27 Lafayette, Ind
- 29 Freeport Ill

MARCH

- 1 Minneapolis Minn
- 4 Cherokee Ia
letter for John
- 7 Columbia Mo
- 8 Laurence Kas (own)
...
- 24 See Homer Folks
Get Katie at 5 PM
- 25 Newark, N.J.
Tony
- 28 Leave for Chicago 11 pm
- 29 Elgin Ill (own)
Battle

. . . .

APRIL 1

- 1 Detroit S P C C (own)
Battle Special child pictures
- 4 Schenectady NY
Battle (own)

- 5 See Homer Folks
 - See Schiff
 - See Freidenberger (Jos A)
- 7 9:30 AM Outlook Off—Mrs. Heath
 - dinner of P . . . Publisher
 - Washington DC.
- 8 Baltimore Friends Sch
 - True Americans
- 9 Hagerstown Md
 - Tony
- 11 Blairstown
- 12 Ogontz School
 - Battle
- 15 48 Henry St
- 19 11 AM 265 Henry St
- 20 Ex Com 48 Henry 10 AM
- 22 Norfolk Conn
 - Com P of Char
 - Tony
- 28 Boston Tech
- 29 Gen Bd Meeting Henry St.

MAY

- 3 Outlook
 - Call on Homer Folks
- 6 Chicago
 - "Our Duties Toward tomorrow"
- 9 Meet at Henry St.
- 11 Perth Amboy
 - ill lect
- 13 Ex Meet in Henry St.
 - Dinner with Tracy 6PM M.
- 16)
- 17) Washington
- 20 Board Meeting Henry St
- 21 (Mr. Howland) } Outlook
 - Townsend }
- Wed 25 Steamer Sails 2 PM

JUNE

- Sun 5 arrived at Copenhagen
 * (Several Entries in Danish during July)

AUGUST

- Sun 7 Ribe Domkirke

Rededication
 (Other entries, August, in Danish)

SEPTEMBER

- 7 Sail for America
 8 Christiana
 24 Lincoln Steffens
 27 Outlook
 Lincoln Steffens
 MacMillans
 29 Spec.meeting Henry St. 10 AM

OCTOBER 1904

- 4 Boston
 Meeting of Committee on Labor 4 PM
 412 Beacon St.
 11 Oberlin Ohio
 14 Belleville NY
 Tony
 18 COS 11 AM
 21 "Battle"
 ... "Reformed Church"
 22 Newburgh
 Tony
 26 MacMillan for books
 27 New Haven Univ.
 Battle They furnish Lant.
 28 Boston teachers
 "The Citizen of Tomorrow"

NOVEMBER

- 1 Albany
 - A Fight for Life
- 3 State College, Pa
- 4 Ridgway, Pa
- 7 Meeting 11 AM Henry St
- 8 Vote early
- 10 Evanston Ill.
 - Battle
- 11 Chicago Auditorium
 -
- 15 Boulder Col
- 17 Colorado Springs
- 21 Salt Lake City
- 22 P.. Utah
- 24 Pocatello Idaho
- 25 Boise Idaho
 - YMCA
- 28 Walla Walla (College)
- 30 Pullman Wash
 - Agricult.coll.

DECEMBER 1

- 1 Lewiston Idaho
 - Opera House
- 2 Spokane, Wash
 - ME Ch.
- 3 Cheney Wash
 - State Normal School
- 5 Seattle Wash.
 - YMCA
- 9 Seattle
- 12 Portland Ore
 - YMCA
- 13 Seattle High School
 -
- 19 Sacramento Cal
- 21 Berkeley
 - W B Settlement Assn

24 Letters from home

....

1905

JANUARY

- 1 Was at Lick Observatory
- 3 Los Angeles
- 4 Riverside Cal
- 5 Redlands Cal
- 6 Ventura Cal
- 7 Los Angeles
- 9 San Francisco Tony
- 10 Palo Alto luncheon at Stanford University
Talk to Students
- 12 3 PM Boys Club
- 4 PM Girls Club
- 14 Commonwealth Club
3-4 PM Council of Women
- 17 Leave for Santa Barbara
- 22 Went to vespers in Santa Barbara Miss.
Santa Barbara *thru Feb. 4*

FEBRUARY

- 6 Claremont, Cal.
- 7 Threw my first snowball this winter
among the peaks of Sierra M— Mtns.
- 9 At Grand Canyon
- 10 Albuquerque
- 11 El Paso, Tex
- 13 Dallas, Tex
- 16 New Orleans La
- 18 Tuskegee Ala
- 20 Auburn Ala
- 21 Birmingham Ala
- 22 Stopped at Washington!!!
- 23 Came home

...

APPENDIX

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MARCH

- 10 Bridgeport Conn True Americans
10 AM 48 Henry St.
- 14 Swarthmore Pa (Pond) Tony
- 15 Sewickley Womans Club (own) 8 PM
- 16 Pittsburg Pa (Pond) Battle
- 18 Buffalo—True Americans
- 20 Kalamazoo Mich Battle
- 21 Jackson, Mich Tony
- 22 Battle Creek
- 24 St. John's M.
N.Y.
- 30 Oneonta NY (Pond).
- 31 Warsaw NY

APRIL

- 1. New Philada O (Redp)
- 3. Minneapolis Min—True Americans
- 4. La Crosse, Wisc. (own
- 6. Benton Harbor, Mich
(letter P.O.
- 10. Monmouth Ill
- 11, 12, 13 Dayton (How Other H.L.
(Battle
(Tony
- 14 Mansfield O Redp.
- 15 Chambersburg Pa Wilson College
- 17 Salem NJ (own) Tony—Women's Club
- 19 Chapel Hill NC (Southern Bureau)
- 24 Woonsocket RI (Redp)
- 25 Concord NH. (Redp)
- 26 T... Mass (Redp)
- 27 Boston, Mass Copley Hall 4 PM
Students Miss Hersey's School
- 28 Groton School

MAY

- 1. Madison, NJ. (Redp)
- 2. Luncheon in Jacob A. Riis House

JACOB A. RIIS

- 4. Dr. Jewett came. Said lungs
involved.
- 6. Dr. ... Said Broncho-pneumonia
.....
- 18. Lammet died
God help us all
. . .

JUNE

- 15 Dr. Robbins
Wethersfield
....
- 29 Go to Stamford

JULY

- 2,3,4,5 Director Campbell of Lick
Observatory Holland House
- 7 Henry St.
- 8 McCloy
- 13 4:30 train for Oyster Bay—
Stay overnight at President's
house take evening clothes
- 17 11 AM Henry St.
- 18 48 Henry St.
McHarg.

AUGUST

- 10 & 11 With President to Staunton &
Jamestown
- 14 bet 3-4
Meet Saffold Hogg, Anspacher
3 PM Assn IPC
4:32 train for Greenwich & Mrs. Lowell
- 15 Meeting on Twin Island
...
- 23. To Andirondacks with Vivi

APPENDIX

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SEPTEMBER

1. Exchange bonds So. Pacific
9. Lyndhurst Club—Tarrytown NY "True Americans"
12. 10 AM 48 Henry St.
6 PM Rutland
14. Macmillan
COS Kellogg
Dr. Wallace
....

OCTOBER

4. Leave for Whitestone
5. Leave for NY
6. Toronto (letters)
- 12 Barre Vt.
- 14 See Allen
- 16 Meriden Conn Britt
17. Boston (Algonquin Club) Britt
19. See Mr. McHarg. be there at 9.00
Henry St. 10 AM
- 20 Rye NY Seminary "True Americans"
- 21 Mr. McHarg comes home
- 24 Reading Pa Teacher's Convention
- 27 New Haven, Conn "Tony's Hardships"
- 29 Phil 11 AM. (Houston Hall)
Camden YMCA 3.45 pm.
- 31 Wellsboro, Penn.

NOVEMBER

3. Carlisle Pa—Battle
5. Cornwall on Hudson
6. Stamford True Americans
7. Garden City St. Paul's School
- 8 Wakefield Mass "Tony"
10. Trenton—Tony
11. Riverdale (our own settlement)
12. J.D.Rockefeller jr Tarrytown before 10
13. Mrs. Lowell meeting

- 14. Baltimore—Battle (Self)
- 15. Philadelphia (Self)
- 17. Amherst Mass (Britt)
- 20. Mansfield Pa
- 21. Scranton Pa
- 22. Newark (Pond
- 24. dinner with Mr. Babbott 6 PM
- 27. Mrs. Dreier
Dinner with Judge Bartlett 21 Pierrepont
- 28. Irvington on Hudson—Battle
- 29. Prison Gate meeting
Outlook office 9 AM to sign book
- 30. Reserve for self

DECEMBER

- 1. Dinner at Washington Sq. Mr. deForrest's house
- 4. 11 AM try clothes
- 5. 2 PM 48 Henry St.
- 6. Lawrenceville, N. J.
- 8. St. Paul's School—Concord, NH.
- 9. Bangor Me
- 11. Augusta, Me—Battle—P.O. letter
- 13. P.O. letter Brattleboro Vt. "Battle"
- 14. try clothes
- 15. at 10—48 Henry St.
Afternoon to Jewish Home
- 18. Call on Parsons 51 Wall St.
Afternoon try on clothes
- 19. Call up H. . . in Rockefeller's office
- 21. 3 PM 48 Henry St.
- 22. Dinner at Mr. Schiff's
- 23. try on clothes
- 26. Call on Parsons
- 27. 10.30—48 Henry St.
- 29. 12—48 Henry St.
Mr. Schiff dinner
- 31. Sick (cancelled YMCA)

Memoranda

In February write Blackwell's Island
article.

Go to Groton boys and spend some days
St. Paul's School

Go to Kentucky and lecture for the old
Jamestown Ky couple (in memory of my
beloved friend John R. Procter)

Eastern Redpath

Chambersburg	125	} Paid \$15 for lantern
Woonsocket	100	
Concord	100	
...	100	
Boston	100	} paid
<i>Southern Bureau</i>		
Chapel Hill	150	

1906

JANUARY

- 2 Providence R.I.
- 4 Alfred NY Redp.
- 6 Lockport NY.
- 8 Elyria O.
- 9 Adrian Mich
- 10 Ypsilanti
- 11 Chicago
- 12 Kewanee Ill
- 13 Springfield Ill.
- 15 G... Ia.
- 16 Ann Arbor Mich
- 17 Albion Mich
- 19 Toledo O
- 22 Bay City Mich
- 24 Kenosha Wis
- 25 Lansing Mich
- 27 Home
- 28 Mother Window to be unveiled
- 30 Epworth League
Wash. DC.
- 31 Stay at White House

JACOB A. RIIS

FEBRUARY

- 1 Wilmington 1 PM.
- 5. 12 oclock—48 Henry St.
- 7 Medford Mas
- 10 MacMillan for books
- 17 Judge Lindsey
- 21 Entered Post Graduate Hospital
as private patient
- 26 Meadville Pa

MARCH

- 1 Morgantown W.Va
- 2 Braddock Pa
- 5 Steubenville O
- 6 Springfield O
- 7 Sick
-
- 27 West Medford Mass
- 28 Westerly R.I.
- 31 Outlook office

APRIL

- 6 48 Henry St.
- 20 10 AM Henry St.
- 23 107 E. 17th
See Dr. Abbe
Dr. Cook
Outlook 11 AM.
- 29 Birthday party

MAY

- 1 Meadville Pa
- 2 Springfield Ohio
- 4 Morgantown W.Va.
- 6 Washington
visit White House
- 7 Lynchburg
- 8 Going home

APPENDIX

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- 15 10 AM Henry St.
- 17 Warren Comes
- 19 Ann. Meetings King's daughters..Bway Tab-
ernacle 2042 Fifth Ave.
- 25 Classical School 4 PM.

JUNE

- 2. S... Mass.
- 3. Groton, Mass
- 4. Meeting of Met. Parks Ass.
- 5. Executive Meeting 48 Henry St.
- 6. Wilkesbarre
- 9 48 Henry St.
- 11. 9.30 Sign contracts in Henry St.
- 14 1 PM 48 Henry St.
- 19 10.30-48 Henry St.
- . . .

JULY

- 1. (Congo grade) School
- 7. Start on vacation to Nova
Scotia
- 9. Halifax, N.S.
- 10 Hawkesbury....
- 11 Arrived at North East Mangaree
Cape Breton Board with Mrs. Ross
(*not* the Postmistress)
- (No Entries till September)

SEPTEMBER

- 10 Yarmouth NS.
- 12 Returned home...
- 17 New York
- 19 Mac Bee
- 20 Lunch with President at 1 PM
- 21 Board meeting 48 Henry 10 AM
- 25 home
- 26 Perth Amboy

- 28 48 Henry St. 10 AM.
 30 Brockton Mass
 Congo Church

OCTOBER

- 1 New York School
 2 P.... School

 4. Vivi School
 5 McHarg
 COS
 8 At home garden work
 9 Dobbs Ferry School
 10 Send Mayor McClellan report
 & see Bishop Potter at Meeting
 ...
 16 McH... School
 Pelham
 17 Everett, Mass.
 22 12 o'clock R.C. Cathedral
 Dr. M.G. 12.30
 24 Dr. M.G. 12.30
 Tony etc.
 27 Open 48 Henry St. Presidents 45th B.day.
 28 YMCA 318 W. 57
 Dr. M.G. 12.30
 8.30-48 Henry
 30 Waterbury Conn.
 My Neighbor
 31 Dr. M.G. 12.20

NOVEMBER

- 2 Dr. M.G. 12.30
 4 Hill School
 7 Marlboro, Mass.
 8 Katie begins boarding with
 Mrs. Robb
 12 N. Attleboro Mass 12.
 "Neighbor"

- 13 Dr. M. G . . .
5.30
- 14 Lawrenceville 10.30 AM.
Making Amer
- 16 8 PM Schiff
Dr. M.G.
- 17. 6 PM. Ed. Devine
- 18 Springfield Mass YMCA
- 20 dinner at 43 W 36th
- (19-24) Reserved for home to prepare Roosevelt
Lecture
- 21. 10.30 Settlement with Mrs. McHarg
- 23 10.30 Settlement
- 27 Calumet Mich
- 30 Fargo, N.D.

DECEMBER

- 1 Valley City, N.D.
- 3. Winnipeg Manitoba
- 6. Great Falls, Mont.
- 7. Helena Mont
- 10 Battle, Mont.
- 13 Chicago YMCA
- 14 Evanston
Roosevelt
- 15 Chicago Teachers (own)
- 17 Iowa
- 19 Quincy Ill
- 23-Jan. 4, 1907 Resting at Mt. Clemens Mich.

JANUARY 1907

- 7. Agr. Coll.
Lansing Mich
- 9. St. Louis
"My Neighbor" (own)
- . . .
- 31. Pay Katie Board

FEBRUARY 1907

- 28 Pay Katie Board

MARCH

- 4 See about paying Equitable
Insurance
- 8 Sandy Hill NY Pond
- 11 Trenton N.J. (Britt)
- 12 Somerville Mass (Britt)
- 13 Amesbury Mass (Britt)
- ...
21 ... Thursday pay Katie's board

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